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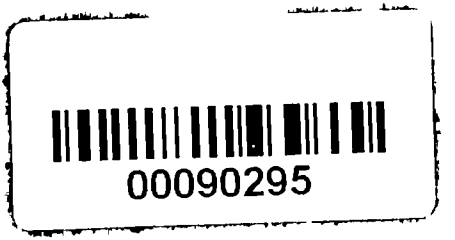
AUTHOR OF "HAWK OF THE DESERT," "IN THE GRIP OF THE WILD WA," ETC.

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TO

AGNES HERBERT,

(THE REAL DIANA)

BEST OF FRIENDS

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THE TWO-STRINGED FIDDLE

CHAPTER I

THE FIRST MOON

THE glorious whiteness of a full moon flooded the vague spaces of the desert as the s.s. *Mesopotamia* passed slowly southward through the Suez Canal.

Diana Forbes, leaving the deck hastily, springing below to seek a wrap against the clear dry coldness of the night air, came into another world in the long deserted passage-way, brilliant in its heavy coating of glossy enamel paint. It was deserted now and strangely quiet; all the usual creaking and "talking" of the boards which makes a ship a thing of life was still, the gentle, gliding, forward motion was not perceptible. Her own cabin was in darkness when she reached it, and she rummaged with difficulty, not caring to turn on the electric switch, for she knew that there was another, and most unwelcome, occupant, who had only come on board that day, to spoil her much appreciated solitude. However, just as she had attained her object, and was withdrawing without speaking, there

came an obvious bid for sympathy in the form of a series of little sniffs out of the darkness.

"You can't be sea-sick, you know," Diana remarked in that not unkindly, but detached, manner, which her friends knew so well. "We are only in the Canal."

"No," moaned a voice from the lower bunk, "only heart-sick."

"Do you think that's as bad?" Diana asked interestedly, poising herself for flight. "I don't."

"Perhaps you've never suffered from it," replied the unknown, with a touch of acrimony in her tone. Then, her desire to retain a listener, even if only an unsympathetic one, getting the better of resentment, she added, "Are you married?"

"I used to be," said Diana cheerily, her manner fully indicating her satisfaction at having escaped from the plight.

"You have never had to part from an only son, perhaps?"

"Not to speak of—— Ronald is with me on board."

"It's my boy," with a burst of woe. "I've had to leave him. I took him home because he was getting too big to be in the East, and now I have to leave him and go back to my husband in Burma."

"That must be very bad," acquiesced Diana in full agreement; she habitually put a little emphasis on certain words in her short sentences, which made them seem full of significance.

"I have left the child with my mother and sister; they say they will be to him all that a mother could be——"

"Well, of course, if you stayed with him, your

husband might find someone who was all that a wife could be," suggested Diana, and with that she fled.

Back to the quiet deck, dotted by the few who braved the sharp cold for the sake of the mysterious glory, she went, treading lightly, a compact figure with a resilience in her walk in keeping with the resilience of the spirit within.

When she rejoined Mark Carstairs on the upper deck he was standing as she had left him, leaning over the white rail below the bridge.

" I have a cabin companion now," she said softly as she drew near, " who is very, very sorry for herself."

" It's Mrs. Fyfe," he answered promptly. " She came on at Port Said. I am detailed to look after her."

" Why you ? "

" She is the wife of one of my chiefs—the firm of Marjoram & Fyfe, of Rangoon."

This evoked from Diana a sharp little exclamation, so that he looked at her in surprise.

" You never told me the name of your firm before," she murmured in explanation.

" Nothing particularly interesting in it, is there ? " Yet he turned his back to the desert and faced her. He was what most women would have described as a quiet brown man. Youngish, not much over thirty, a little taller than the average, and quite unremarkable in appearance. Reticence was written all over him, and, as is usual with men of that type, he gave an impression of firmness, as if he held himself and his own affairs well in hand, and was not likely to appeal to anyone else for either advice or help.

Chance fellow-passengers from Marseilles, four days

ago these two had not known of each other's existence, even now they knew nothing of each other's circumstances, yet Mrs. Forbes' exclamation, and her expression, "You never told me," showed a certain growth of intimacy. Carstairs was a man who did not talk when he had nothing to say, and had plainly no notion of playing up to what was expected of him after the manner of the more nervous men on board, and Diana had found this restful, and had relaxed in his favour the aloofness that others on board had felt to be baffling in her.

"Marjoram & Fyfe, of Rangoon," Carstairs repeated, as she did not answer, "General merchants and importers."

"You will certainly never succeed as a merchant," said she evasively. "You are not pushing enough."

"Business demands more than one sort; perhaps I am the other sort."

"Is Mr. Fyfe the pushing partner?"

"He's the driving wheel; goes into the finance, docks the unnecessary pice, brings up the profits by keeping down the outgoings. Has the reputation of being the worst-tempered man in Rangoon. I'm rather sorry for him myself, must be like perpetual toothache to be tied to my lady in there."

"I haven't seen her yet."

"All golden curls and powder puff and egotism," Carstairs explained. "She cannot understand any man who doesn't succumb at sight."

"*You* obviously have not."

"I'm not that sort." He gave a harsh and rather disagreeable laugh. "I keep clear of women."

"Very sensible, though not complimentary! Now that we've had a character sketch of Mr. Fyfe, tell me what Mr. Marjoram is like? It's an uncommon name."

"Marjoram is the handsomest man I know," replied Carstairs with deliberation. "They say his mother was Italian, he certainly has the most wonderful eyes, unlike anything you see in an Englishman, but otherwise he doesn't look foreign. Is about six foot two in height. Kind of man all women rave about."

"You seem to have about as good an opinion of women as I have of men. Is this paragon married?"

"No; he's been about too much." Then suddenly, "I'd like you to meet him."

"Now why?"

"I wonder what you'd make of him."

"I never could 'make' anything——" Diana began, then broke off as a boy of about fifteen, with the energy of healthy youth in every easy movement, launched himself along beside them, exclaiming:—

"How perfectly glorious! You never told me half what the Canal was like."

Diana passed her arm affectionately across his shoulders.

"Didn't I, Ron? I tried to, but then you know I'm a duffer; I never can describe anything."

They stood awhile in silence, the three of them, while the banks glided by as smoothly and swiftly as flowing water. The white posts at intervals, with the shadows behind them, assumed the appearance of a grotesque procession of white Arabs leading endless camels. The smoky smell of the desert rose to their

nostrils, speaking of the gorgeous background of the East in its age-long history and splendour. The faint hiss of escaping steam was a gentle accompaniment to the forward movement, so frictionless it was unfelt.

> "'The moon's an arrant thief,
> And her pale fire she snatches from the sun,'"

quoted Diana.

"Shakespeare!" chimed in Ronald. "It's always safe to add that when mother quotes anything, Mr. Carstairs."

Carstairs laughed. "You're a lucky fellow to go out East so young and so comfortably," he said, his mind on the future rather than the present.

"Ron knows his luck very well," said Diana fondly. "It's very few boys of fifteen who get the chance of an expedition to Burma for sport."

"Sport!" echoed Carstairs, withdrawing his pipe from his mouth in astonishment. "Is that what you're going for? Do you shoot?"

"She's a jolly good shot," Ronald exclaimed. "I'm no hand at it yet, but I'm going to learn."

"Where have you shot?" Carstairs asked Diana interestedly.

"In China a little. British Columbia mostly. We hope to get a guyal, don't we, Ron? Perhaps if we're very lucky, a tiger. A great many sambhur, of course——"

"You are the very last woman——"

Diana laughed, "Why, please? Because I sew a bit?"

He thought of her as he had seen her, sitting day by day about the deck, neat, feminine, doing some dainty

white work, and he decided that that question needed no answer. Instead, he merely gave a grunt as he turned again to the rail.

"Interpret, please," she demanded with a laugh.

"You're a mystery!"

"I'm not the only one," she said significantly.

Ronald, with the restlessness of his age, disentangled himself and went off on some sweet business of his own. Diana felt the wince that followed her shaft, and was it fancy, or did an expression of being hard driven pass over the face beside her so clear in the white light?

"There's no mystery about me," Carstairs broke out with more warmth than she had known in him yet.

"No? I thought there was! My mistake. Why are the men betting about you in the smoke-room then?"

"About me?"

She knew that he knew it, but her curiosity was alight, so she went on, "Whether you'd hold out or not. Ronald heard them. Those two rice merchants, Watson and Hagan——"

"What did they say?"

"That they hoped you'd floor the firm after all."

"Marjoram & Fyfe?"

"I suppose so." And after a time, with a delicate insinuation of personal interest in her tone, she added: "What is it we're to hope Marjoram & Fyfe will be floored about?"

The pronoun did not escape him, he warmed to it.

"You would like to see them floored?"

"On any grounds whatever," she answered firmly.

It was a measure of the, as yet hardly recognised, confidence between them, that after a few moments, during which he felt the pull of her tense interest, he did actually begin to try to tell her.

"I came out here because I had to," he started abruptly. "I was on my beam-ends at the time. My father had died suddenly, and I was in debt even for the later part of my engineering course. I had to work for years to clear that off, and then lived hand to mouth. The firm offered to pay my passage out if I signed on for seven years, with some little conditions which I hardly noticed at the time. I've been working for them six years, and now the unexpected has happened——" He paused, looked this way and that, slid a step nearer, exactly as a conspirator on a stage would, thought Diana, and announced in a low tone:—

"I've discovered a machine for cracking nuts; there never has been one, you know."

The way in which the fact was communicated showed it to be of no small importance, but dazzling beyond all ordinary facts in a splendour of its own. A feeling of despair in ever rising to the occasion encompassed Diana, and then with a gust of thankfulness she remembered a phrase that she had heard in the ship and treasured for just such an emergency. She brought it out whole-heartedly: "The beginning of the Millennium!"

It seemed to fit nicely. Carstairs accepted it at once, and only demurred to the proper extent demanded by modesty.

"Hardly that perhaps. But the dickens of it is

that tucked away in the odds and ends of that agreement, is a clause which binds me to give to the firm for a nominal sum any invention I may patent while with them."

"But—need you patent it?"

"Not if I know it! But some other fellow may get wind of it meantime, or they might."

"Then?"

"They'd slip in ahead."

"It is but a year, and until then you must lie very low."

"That's not so difficult. It's not my especial temptation to want to discuss such things."

"Where is the difficulty then?"

"I'm such an ass. I can't keep off it when I'm alone. I'm bound to be drawing it on any odd bit of paper. I can't help it. I vow I won't, and then I find myself in the middle of it—lost—anyone might be looking over my shoulder."

Despite his proud assertion he was unable to refrain from continuing:—

"Every competing firm would be bound to have it or go under. It completely revolutionises all present methods, there is a fortune in it either way; to hold on to it oneself and undersell all rivals, or to manufacture and sell the machines holding the rights. That, of course, would be my line if only I were free. And it's so simple. The astounding part of it is that no one has ever thought of it before."

"But," interpolated Diana cautiously, feeling that a false step might betray her colossal ignorance. "I didn't know nuts grew in Burma."

"Ground-nuts," he said scornfully. "What you, perhaps, call monkey-nuts."

"Oh, monkey-nuts!" she exclaimed, trying to infuse ardour into her tone. It was better to leave it there until she remembered exactly what they were, and what use was made of them. Ronald might know, boys did pick up such odd information about things like nuts.

The canal seen by daylight was a revelation to those who had first been introduced to it the night before, for it was so entirely changed. The mystery which had thrilled, drawing the mind on into vague distance, was replaced by a bright hardness that left nothing to the imagination. The bare dust-coloured banks, the little cardboard-like stations in their oases of trees, and the iridescent brilliance of the blue water under the heights beyond Suez, seemed to shut one in like stage scenery, and fill the eye with colour and form so clear and satisfying there was no getting beyond it.

Long before the day was done Carstairs knew all about Mrs. Forbes; the veil was torn from her ruthlessly by Mrs. Fyfe, who had annexed him as if he had been a homely piece of family furniture.

"She is one of *the* Forbes of Loch Eyre, of course," she said, settling herself comfortably in her deck chair and throwing a faintly-tinted chiffon scarf around her head. "At least, her husband was. I asked her point-blank, and she couldn't deny it. The boy is her step-son. There was a good deal about it in the papers at her husband's death; he was much older

than she, and he left everything he had to his son. She didn't get a penny except some paltry pittance as the lad's guardian, and even that ceases when he comes of age, when she will be entirely dependent on what he allows her." She put her delicately perfumed head close under Carstairs' nose; this was by force of habit, for she had long ago discovered that this particular specimen of mankind was impervious to her wiles. "The most strange thing of all is that if the boy dies before he comes of age, the whole property comes to her! Now can you imagine any man in his senses making a will like that?"

"Very hard on her," muttered Carstairs.

"Hard on *her?* Yes, in some ways, but that is not the point, hard on the boy rather. Don't you see what a premium it puts upon his death?"

If it had been anyone but his employer's wife who had said that, Carstairs would have shown his indignation, but, as a rule, his contempt for her was so profound that nothing she said had power to stir him even to a passing emotion.

"Luckily she is devoted to him," he said calmly, feeling he must make some remark or be rude.

"Pssh!" said pretty little Mrs. Fyfe. "How easily men are taken in! That is part of her pose, of course. Do you suppose for one moment she would let her natural resentment appear?"

Feeling unaccountably provoked Carstairs seized the opportunity of the Captain's coming up to break loose from her. But later on the same day she almost seized him as he inadvertently came within her range.

"I have something *very* important to tell you," she

said confidentially. "Come up to the front end of the ship where we shall not be overheard." Then having led her unwilling captive out of earshot of anyone else, she leaned forward close to him and spoke with tremendous meaning. "My surmise is correct." Seeing his look of non-comprehension she went on, "About Mrs. Forbes. Do you know she is taking that child to Burma?"

Carstairs disclaimed any special information.

"She is taking him to shoot big game!" She gazed at him with her turquoise coloured eyes, as if expecting an outburst.

"Indeed!" her unwilling listener brought himself to say.

Still nearer she drew, and emphasised each dropping word by a tap of her finger on his coat-sleeve. "She—is—taking—him—to—his—death——"

A burst of happy laughter broke in on them, and Ronald sped round the deck with the ship's cat after him, making the most absurd antics over a twisted bait of paper and string. The boy was tall for his age, slight and fair, with the innocence of clean childhood in his grey eyes, and more than a hint of dry humour in the lines of his mouth; a lovable boy, with the indefinable stamp of race in every line of him.

"It makes me weep," cried Mrs. Fyfe dramatically. "Oh, Mr. Carstairs, you must help me. At all costs we must save him!"

CHAPTER II

MARJORAM & FYFE

EVERYTHING was in full swing down at the business end of the Rangoon river, some ten days later, at about eight o'clock in the morning. Owing to the climate work begins early in Burma, and ends early, so that office men may get a little exercise before the quickly dropping darkness.

The huge godowns that lined the low river banks stood crowded in between offices, squat warehouses, and timber mills. Many were roofed with corrugated iron painted a startling "Gregory's powder" red, rather unnecessary in a climate that supplies more than all the sensation of heat a human being can put up with. Jetties and wharves projected into the thick brown water, and clustered around their ends bustled little sampans like swarms of water-flies. In the deeper water was an absurd but most picturesque medley of craft, in which figured largely the native Burmese boats, with their high rising prows and graceful lines, aristocrats of ancestry compared with the hideous tin kettles of tramp steamers covered with rust and filth from their smoky, salty plying to and from port to port.

Whilst a certain number of small neatly-built Burmans worked at the coolie labour of unloading or

reloading the bales, crates and cargo, they were few in number compared with the low-caste Indians or men of mixed nationality at the work. In command of almost every important transaction stood out the dignified figure of a Chinese foreman collecting tallies, seeing that orders were being carried out, and making sure that no task was being shirked. What with the swarm of coolies from India and Intelligent John from China the Burman is being squeezed out of his own trade, but he serenely refuses to recognise that a day will come when he can no longer live by sitting on a fence to watch his rice shoot, speculating on how much the broker will advance for the forthcoming crop.

One of the most imposing of the buildings on the river front bore the joint names of Marjoram & Fyfe in huge letters that could be read half a mile off. It was not a single building, but one of various heights and styles, linked together by the letters splayed across the river side. The street or inland side of this great lop-sided mass was much less noticeable than that which faced the water, and it would have been difficult for anyone not well acquainted with it from that aspect to judge which was the right entrance, amid the many, all equally insignificant, that led into the various sections. The junior partner, Edward Fyfe, was just arriving in his buggy, drawn by a smart little Burmese pony. He threw the reins to the syce as he stepped out, and made his way up the long wooden staircase into the upper storey of the warehouse, coming out eventually in a great white-washed barn of a place under the roof, open all along the river frontage on to a verandah under deep eaves.

Rows of Eurasian clerks were sitting at clumsy wooden desks making out manifests and invoices, and they bent in increased eagerness of toil over their tasks as the thin, worried looking man, who for the moment held their destinies in hand, appeared. Alfonso Miraflores had been recounting to his neighbour, José da Costa, how the English officer had danced with his cousin Laura at the subscription ball the night before. "He keess Laura, verry pretty girl, soon she will be Mrs. Symington, Mrs. Major Symington, then I shall be the cousin of Breetish officer. I will not then ask you to my house, I shall be too proud, he, he!" But his titter was stifled at his employer's step.

His neighbour on the other side, not hearing the warning in time, gave him such a jog in the ribs in his anxiety to catch this interesting conversation, that Miraflores' pen spattered over the beautiful copper-plate handwriting of the manifest he had completed, he turned with furious words on the offender, but dived back into an attitude of deepest study as Mr. Fyfe passed. In spite of the soiled elbow of his white office coat being interposed, Fyfe saw the mess, as he saw everything, and stopped.

"It is not much use spending time over neat work if you spoil it all by carelessness, Miraflores," he said, "make a re-copy of that manifest in your tiffin time."

"It was a beetle, sir, that fell from the ceiling into Miraflores' inkpot," ventured the one who had done the mischief, anxious to forestall any lively disclosures on Miraflores' part. "It was not his fault."

To the infinite delight of those near enough to

follow the incident Fyfe did just glance up at the stained and splotched whitewash of the roof, and the faintest possible titter ran through the room. He made no further remark, however, and passed on.

On the verandah a pleasant, shrewd-faced Burman wearing a pink goung-baung, with a coquettish "rabbit's ear" twist to finish it off, was leaning over the rail, giving directions to those engaged in unloading below. The noise of the winches was thunderous, and after a glance and a nod Fyfe went on into a room piled with Manchester goods on one side, and great stores of rice on the other; this was where the Import and Export departments met. The Burman had followed him, and to him Fyfe gave a sharp order, noting that some of the sacks had been gnawed by rats. Then he passed on through a small door and across a wooden platform, entering the much better building adjoining, where he and his partner shared an office.

Marjoram was already there, seated at his desk immersed in a pile of telegrams and letters. Still a comparatively young man, thirty-five or so, he was, as Carstairs had said, strikingly handsome. In spite of his great height he was well proportioned, so that he did not appear awkward, and the lift of his head on his shoulders would have marked him out for kingship in any primitive community. His strong, well-cut features denoted an amount of force and virility strangely at variance with the magnificent dark eyes, enhanced by lashes which are sometimes seen on the face of a small boy, but rarely on that of any adult man or woman. His brown holland suit and

white silk shirt were spotless, and he had the peculiar personal neatness of a sailor. Seated in the raw office surroundings he seemed like some glorious wild animal in a cage too small for it. He nodded good morning as his partner entered, but did not speak.

"She's coming up the river," said Fyfe curtly, as he hung up his stained topee beside Marjoram's spotless one.

"I know." Tom Marjoram's voice was as distinguished as his personality.

"The question is what are we going to do now? We can't drift, the matter is urgent."

"Seems so." Marjoram passed across a letter he had already opened.

It was from a banking firm with whom they had done business many years.

> "Sirs,—We regret to inform you that we cannot honour any more of your cheques or make any further advances to your firm. We are not pressing you to repay your overdraft, but we cannot allow it to be increased."

"No frills about it," growled Fyfe.

"You'll have to see him. Here's another."

He threw over a very curt communication from another firm demanding payment for a heavy dock bill overdue.

"We could meet that, of course," was Fyfe's comment, "but if we do, all the others will be upon our backs. We're not anywhere near done yet, and if the *Aratoon* brings in a good cargo we can carry on

well another six months, which will give us time to turn round."

"It's all a question of confidence, of course," agreed Marjoram. "Anything which restored their confidence in us would set us sailing again, but credit is like a lady's honour, once blown upon and it is gone."

Fyfe had been opening the wires on his desk. "This has come in the nick of time," he said. "It's from Harrison, whom I instructed to find out about Carstairs. I was wondering why on earth the man hadn't let us know, and so I cabled; I meant to tell you. He cables that no patent has been taken out in Carstairs' name, and, so far as he can ascertain, none for nut-husking at all."

"That's unsatisfactory; all the leave wasted. Carstairs is a simple sort of fellow, I thought he'd have fallen into the trap."

"Looks simpler than he is, in my opinion. I've been up against him for a year on this job, and can make nothing of him."

"There may be nothing in it after all."

"Possibly, but if it does what we gather he claims for it it would be worth something."

"Do you think you'll have any better chance now he comes back from leave energetic and fed-up with his own importance?"

Fyfe walked over and stood by the entrance to the verandah. "All things are possible, even with a man who doesn't drink; one never knows; a chance moment, unguarded; pity we can't get at him through a woman, but he's such a devil of a misogynist Violet has no use for him."

"She's coming home this trip, too, isn't she?"

"Yes; joined the old tub at Port Said, came overland as far as she could—such a wretched sailor."

"Perhaps she'll have got it out of him in the dreamy confidences of moonlight nights on board," suggested Marjoram smiling.

"Not she! I'm going down on the launch directly the ship is signalled."

"Are you willing to leave the game entirely to me?" Marjoram asked seriously, stretching his long limbs backwards in his chair.

Fyfe turned and looked at him. "What, about Carstairs?" he asked, rather startled. "What's your idea?"

Marjoram laughed, and threw down the ruler with which he had been playing. "You've done your best, in season and out of season, this last year, to induce him to hand over to you; you've had much more to do with him all along than I, and you've failed. It's up to you to let me handle him a bit."

"It means I'm to stand aside and not interfere, whatever you do?"

"It means that."

"Hell, Marjoram! I don't altogether like it; you're a bit of a pirate, you know——"

Tom Marjoram laughed pleasantly. "All right, to ruin we go."

"Can't you give me any idea of what you mean to do?"

Marjoram merely smiled and returned to his correspondence. He touched a spring bell on his desk, and almost before the sound died away a nervous

Eurasian clerk stood at his elbow. Fyfe's summons usually took twice as long to answer.

"Take these, Pereira, and carry out instructions. Bring me answers to my queries in one hour from now."

"Yes, sir, I do that, sir, exactly," said the clerk, bowing as he backed out.

"Is it all lengths?" Fyfe asked, when he had vanished.

"As you know yourself, it seems to be that or nothing now," his partner returned, without looking at him. Then he rose and took up his topee. "I have to go down to the Chartering Department to see Min King, to whom I gave an appointment. Grand man, Min King! Mustn't be a minute late, or he'll be offended and break us."

"Ah, Min King. He——" Fyfe stopped, but the intonation caused by his deep-drawn breath conveyed the immensity of security the power of Min King could offer.

Marjoram hesitated, and turned back. "It's impossible to ask him," he said, rather hurriedly, speaking low.

"His refusal would leave us, at all events, no worse off than before."

"A rebuff from a Chinaman? Count that nothing?"

"He wouldn't rebuff you; no Oriental of Min King's standing could be so rude."

"True. He would remain as impassively benign as a Buddha in bronze, but it would flay unpleasantly, none the less."

"Any other man might well avoid the experience,

doubting the chance, but you—the chance is on your side."

"I know it."

"He will do things for you no human being could request from him."

"Even a Chinaman may be allowed his fancies for white mice," interpolated Majoram mockingly, as if making a quotation.

Fyfe shut up like a box-lid. Many a time had he puzzled over the mysterious preference undoubtedly displayed by the Chinaman for his partner, but whenever he dared to approach the subject Marjoram swerved aside. Did he himself know to what detail of mind or body he owed this partiality? Even if he did, his attitude showed he was by no means inclined to "bank on it" to the extent of attempting to draw the wealthy and powerful Chinaman in as a support to the firm's finances.

After a moment of silence he again made for the door.

"Wait a minute," said Fyfe hastily. "Why should I care? About Carstairs, I mean. I hold no brief for Carstairs, let him look after himself. Besides he has only to hand over the goods if he finds himself in a tight place, and he's trying to cheat us as it is. Yes, Marjoram, yes, do what you will, I shan't interfere."

Marjoram stopped with his hand on the door. "No questions asked? No remarks made? In fact, you'll back me as a partner should?" he asked, in his pleasant way.

"I don't say I'll take a hand——"

"I'm not asking you. Merely not to interfere and not to give me away to outsiders."

"Right. I promise that."

"Good. Kind regards to Mrs. Fyfe," and he was gone.

CHAPTER III

HUSBAND AND WIFE

THE dining-room of the Fyfes' bungalow was on the ground floor, and the numerous openings and doorways on to the verandah were only covered by light curtains. Two bare-footed servants waited dexterously on their master and mistress, who talked just as freely whether they were there or not, for it is one of the deep-rooted convictions of the European resident that it doesn't matter what you say before a native, even if he understands English excellently well. Mrs. Fyfe had been " home " in Rangoon for a week, and now stood waiting in the upper verandah with expectation shining on her pretty face. She was dressed in a dull blue chiffon gown that showed off her radiant fairness to the best advantage, and the light in her blue eyes, and the spot of colour in the centre of each cheek, made her unusually brilliant. Yet when Ted Fyfe entered in his dinner jacket, instead of showing or expressing pleasure, he only gave a horrified start, " Good heavens ! Surely we're not dining out ? "

All the sparkle died out of his wife's face, and a certain hardness replaced it, but still she replied gaily enough. " No, silly ; aren't you gratified that I dress for you alone ? " He laughed shortly. " If I hadn't to pay for the frocks, I might be."

"You talk sometimes as if you would be glad *not* to pay for them. There are plenty who would think it a privilege; shall I let them?"

As he did not answer, she went on: "I don't believe you would ever know even if I did, you never notice anything."

"You think I don't."

"I know you don't."

The khansamah salaaming announced dinner.

Edward Fyfe's face was not that of a happy man, his eyes resembled those of some animal that expected momentarily to be hurt, and was watchful and on its guard. He was thin and worn; evidently a man whose nerves were uncomfortably near the surface. Though he was the best amateur jockey in Burma, he was not popular with men, which told of some strong counterbalancing defect. His touchiness which, as "a devil of a temper," might have been overlooked, made him a bad companion when it appeared as mere surface irritability. He felt everything very keenly, and had not the strength to hide his feelings under a stoical exterior. He was the kind of man who should have married a serene, placid woman, from whose cisterns he might have replenished his own. But Violet had nerves too, and her superficial vanity, which might have amused a larger-minded man, merely jarred on him; he had never forgiven her for not being the ideal he had expected. He could not take her as she was. When she was away from him, as happened very frequently, his idealisation of her flourished mightily, and on her return she instantly shattered it. She had not the wit to pretend to be

what he supposed her, and she was like a child in her artless exhibition of her follies.

When a scrap of cold meat, that had already done duty twice, appeared again on the dinner-table, Fyfe signed to the chokrah to take it away. "I shouldn't have the face to cut it again," he broke out to his wife, "send that cook away."

"It's not the cook's fault, I ordered it; don't you like me to be nice and economical? If you are so dainty, how can I help it? It's excellent cold meat."

"Why the devil can't the man do it up somehow? It's your business to find out such things, but as you don't understand them get a cook who does."

"He's very good, he spends about a third of what the last one did in the bazaar."

"The last man knew his business anyway."

"You're upset about something," returned his wife irrelevantly.

"I'm busy."

"Bad news?"

"No."

"There's an excellent pudding, Ted, English receipt, and it only cost——"

"You'll drive me crazy with your household economies," he exclaimed. "All you scrape and save and stint in a year by not giving us decent food wouldn't pay for one such gown as you have on your back."

"Oh, but that's really important," she replied naïvely. The one quality in her which irritated her husband more than any other was her latent hardness; on the surface soft and yielding, below she was steel; she was never hurt, never sore, whatever he

might say; but always complacent with the complacency of perfect self-satisfaction and indifference. She wanted to keep the peace because squabbles were worrying, but she did not really care one pin-point for his love, all she desired was open flattery, and for that she sighed in vain.

"I should have thought it was important that I should get properly fed," he retorted. "I know you never want to eat anything, but I'm differently made."

She laughed as if he had paid her a compliment. "Yes, I never eat anything much," she said. "I always think it's disgusting to talk so much about eating and drinking."

Too well he knew the futility of argument, she would apparently listen, but the little pleased smile would betray that her thoughts were far elsewhere; she never heard disagreeable home truths on principle, it was bad for the complexion.

"I was going to ask you something," she said presently, eating a crystal fruit out of a dainty silver dish.

He made no remark.

Ignoring the servants, who were still busy behind the screen at the end of the room, she came round to him and knelt on the bare floor, and put her hands on his shoulders.

"Oh, Ted, I do wish you'd sometimes realise what I really *am* like," she exclaimed with a little sigh. "You're married to much the prettiest woman in Rangoon. Half the men I meet are mad in love with me."

Even he was forced to laugh at that, as he raised

her. "I sometimes wish you were an ill-favoured country lass," he said, but not ill-naturedly, and his arm was round her as they went out of the room together.

"Will you promise to do what I ask?" Violet inquired, seizing opportunity, as she stood trying to look her best under the tall red-shaded lamp.

"I never promise until I know."

"Ted, I must give a dinner now I am back. There are such a lot of people I want to ask."

"You know I object to your dinners, you don't do them well enough," he said crossly. "As a matter of fact we couldn't in any case afford to do them as they should be done."

"Oh, but we will—we will," she cried earnestly, with clasped hands. "It shall all be beautiful. I want to ask people to meet Mrs. Forbes; her story is exciting interest all over cantonments, and she will go hardly anywhere, and has refused—they say"—with bated breath—"an invitation from Government House itself, she will only stay in that awful hotel. Then, too, I must have Mr. Marjoram, why does he never come? It is absurd; he is your partner, and you ought to make him."

"Ask him," he answered, with a sneering laugh. "Ask him personally, no man could resist you, you know; isn't he one of those 'mad in love' with you?"

"I have never been able to make any impression on Tom Marjoram," said Violet sadly, "I always admit my failures, they are so few I don't need to worry about them, and as for him he is stone, he doesn't

do anything for anyone else either. Yes, I will ask him, and I will tell him about Mrs. Forbes; when he hears about her and her step-son, he will be sure to be interested, it's just like a story-book."

"You'll get run in for libel if you're not careful."

"Me? Whatever for?"

"You say the whole of Rangoon is talking about this unfortunate woman. Who started it?"

"Not me," answered Violet ungrammatically, shaking her dainty head. "Why, Mrs. Rowntree told me the whole thing again, at the gymkhana last night, and it was quite different from mine—lots more I hadn't heard."

He smiled sardonically, but he was hardly listening. "I think on the whole it wouldn't be a bad thing if we did give a dinner at this juncture," he said slowly. "But mind it must be properly done—blow the expense for once."

"Oh, Ted!" she breathed in an ecstasy. "Then you won't say anything if I have a new dress for it."

"Great Heavens! that's no consequence. What's the matter with the one you have on?"

"This old thing! Never mind, we needn't discuss that. It will have to be short notice, or we shall miss the Forbes woman. I'll go personally to ask Tom Marjoram; don't breathe a word of it first or he'll be prepared with an excuse."

Her husband laughed cynically. "What is Mrs. Forbes like?" he asked.

"Not pretty! Oh, you needn't purse up your mouth at that coming from me! It's true; I don't think anyone would call her pretty. But there is

something provoking about her expression that seems to work wonders with men."

"We'll see what effect she has on Marjoram."

"We'll have a reception afterwards for all the people we don't care about! Oh!"

So it happened that first thing the next morning Violet drove round to her husband's office, in her big open carriage with two high-stepping walers, and, what she liked best of all, a syce who ran before with a switch at the street corners to clear people out of the way. Short of red outriders it was the thing Violet had most desired in her married life, and she had never ceased her pressure on her husband until he had procured her the outfit. On state occasions His Excellency the Lieutenant-Governor had the outriders, but not even he and Lady Meldrum had a smarter turn-out.

Nevertheless, her nerves played her tricks, and when the high-spirited horses plunged, or took a corner too closely, she screamed shrill volleys of mixed Hindostani and English at her imported Indian coachman, with deadly words of abuse, which would have earned her a knife in her back in any bazaar. She was the daughter of a publican in Liverpool, and though her radiant prettiness had won her a comparative prize in the matrimonial market, she often bewailed the fate which had only brought the still better opportunities within range as a result of that venture which closed her personal hazard. And the precedence of "civilians" over commercials was ever a pricking thorn in her flesh.

Tom Marjoram kept her waiting a few moments

after she had sent up her card, but when he was free he himself came down the teak staircase leading directly to the offices to wait on her. A splendid figure he was, apologising with that superb manner of his that made Violet sigh for her undistinguished husband.

She walked up beside him to the office, and looked up at him with eyes of the most unusual blue from under the becoming white felt double terai she wore. She was always at her best with her husband's partner, for the shrill cheekiness of her character was toned down by a touch of nervousness.

"Mr. Marjoram, I want, I do want, you to promise to dine with us in a fortnight's time," she exclaimed earnestly.

He laughed. "Sit down, Mrs. Fyfe, this is a serious matter for discussion; you know I make a rule of never dining out at mixed parties."

"Yes, I know, you only go to bachelor dinners; but why should men only——"

"Have to put up with me? I don't know."

"Women would—very much appreciate it." She twinkled a little over the blatant compliment, and continued hastily, "Why shouldn't I say it? You're not the least embarrassed, though you pretend to be; you know it all quite well yourself."

"And try to work up a spurious interest in my personality by being so exclusive?" he queried, seated now at his desk, and leaning forward to look right into her eyes.

"Well, don't be exclusive with me."

"You ask rather a hard thing. I take it you mean

a big dinner, not just with you and Fyfe alone, as I have sometimes been before ? "

" About sixteen or twenty people to dinner, and a reception with a little dancing and bridge for others afterwards."

" The date ? "

" Tuesday fortnight."

" I'm afraid that settles it, it can't be done. There is a man coming over from Bassein on business who will be staying with me that night." He examined a hanging calendar on which she could perceive there was something written against the date in question.

Even Violet had not the effrontery to press him to bring " the man on business," she knew she would only be countered ; he did not intend to come, and did not take any trouble to conceal it.

" I am so very sorry," she said rising, and about her genuineness there could be no question now. " I did so want you to meet a most interesting woman, a Mrs. Forbes, who came over on the boat with me."

" Mrs. Forbes," he said, dropping the calendar, and turning. " Where does she come from ? "

" From Loch Eyre. I happen to know all about her because my grandfather knew the family very well ; he lived there."

She did not explain, what she need have felt no shame about, that her grandfather had kept the small local shop, smelling of coffee and tarred rope, slates and cheese.

" Forbes, Forbes," said Marjoram reflectively. " I seem to have met some Forbes somewhere."

" This one is the widow of The Forbes of Loch

Eyre; he died a few years ago, leaving her with a step-son, to whom all the money belongs. She has the boy with her here; she is completely dependent on him, and will not let him out of her sight."

"What is she like?"

Violet hesitated; but she was too wary to reply as she had done to her husband. "Very pretty," she began at last. "Fair and very neat and compact."

"Then she can't be the lady I used to know," he answered carelessly. She took it that he implied doubt of her statement as to the identity of Mrs. Forbes. "Oh, yes, but she *is* the Mrs. Forbes of Loch Eyre," she asserted eagerly. "Of course, I am much younger than she is, and when I knew her before I was only a little girl, but we used to be companions when she first married." With this astounding untruth she rose to go.

"I am so disappointed you won't come," she said, at the door.

"See here, Mrs. Fyfe," he hedged. "I shouldn't like to cloud those brilliant eyes of yours even for a second. Would it be presuming too much on your kindness to ask if I might bring my friend round to the reception, after we have had our business talk over dinner?"

"Certainly. Of course." She smothered down the temptation to push further, and ask him to bring the friend to dinner, for in her inmost heart she knew Marjoram would do exactly what he intended to do, and no more, and as she made the grip at self-restraint she looked up at him with that wistful, alluring glance which, for its own ends, providence has seen fit to

paint into some eyes without any corresponding feeling behind.

Marjoram put his hands on her shoulders and, bending down, kissed her full on the lips. It was very reverently and gently done, not with any fervour of passion; but he had never attempted anything of the kind before with his partner's wife, and she was transported straightway into a heaven of bliss. She was so over-powered by the feelings the kiss evoked that all her coquetry went out of her, and she walked silently down the stairs by his side, not daring even to look at him. He helped her into her carriage, gave the coachman the order, and stood bareheaded in the doorway as she drove off.

"That will give the little lady something to think about," he said softly to himself as he mounted the stairway again. Entering his room he found his partner there, having come in as usual by the warehouse door. "Hullo, Fyfe," he exclaimed carelessly. "Your missus has just been here about a tamasha of sorts on Tuesday sennight. I shall have Evans of Bassein with me that night, but have promised to bring him round after dinner."

CHAPTER IV

AT THE GREAT GOLDEN PAGODA

"I'M sorry I have to go so early, Mrs. Fyfe, I can't leave Ronald alone any longer; I've enjoyed it immensely, thanks," said Diana, speaking with her own peculiar little emphasis on certain words.

She was standing on the verandah of the Fyfes' bungalow, after dinner on the evening of "Tuesday sennight," and she spoke the truth, she had enjoyed it all immensely; the gay dinner-table gorgeous with silver and crackers, flowers and fruit; the bright, sociable people and the lively chatter. People seemed to be more full of spirits, more ready to let themselves go here than at home. Diana could never be dull where human nature was unrolled before her, and none of the little characteristic incidents had escaped her. Her neighbour, a good-natured planter, had advised her in an undertone to take the last two cutlets on the dish handed to her.

"You never know what you're likely to get next here, if anything," he had said, in an unconventional way which was a real joy to her.

"But one of these is yours," she had objected.

"No, no, here's my share, advancing from the opposite direction. Only one, you see. The two boys meet here in the waiting. There's one cutlet

over for the dish, as we were always taught, and you're in luck to get it!"

Opposite to them was a rosy-cheeked newly joined "civilian," on whom Mrs. Fyfe pressed some rather damaged sweets from a pile in a dish before her. The youth, too shy to refuse, kept nervously bolting them, and nearly choked when his hostess remarked, with great satisfaction, "Well, I *am* glad to get someone to eat those bon-bons. I've had them in the store-room since last cold weather, and somehow they never would go off; the times they've been on this table!"

In spite of its being "cold weather," it was hot enough to cause the men guests to change their limp rags of collars immediately after dinner, even before the dancing began, and it was then that Diana had approached her hostess, reminding her that she was reluctantly compelled to go, as Ronald was alone at the hotel.

As she went down the broad teak steps followed by Mark Carstairs, she found her host at the bottom. And he, looking up at her, involuntarily recalled his wife's remarks about her.

"Not pretty!" How like Violet! Never would she admit another woman's claim to be on her own undisputed level.

Diana's mass of fair hair was beautifully arranged, and the threads, silvered under the artificial light, stood out like an aureole round her small head. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright above the fringed silk Chinese shawl she had thrown around her. She repeated the reason of her early departure to her host.

"You ought to have brought the boy," said he. "We could easily have found a place for him. I don't like your going back alone."

"If Mrs. Forbes will allow me, I will see her to the hotel," broke in Carstairs from behind.

"You can come if you like," said Diana. "But I am quite all right, thanks."

As they appeared on the lower verandah a troop of white-robed boys, who had been squatting under the great plumbago tree awaiting their masters, stood up. "Fah Sien," called Diana, and instantly a pleasant-looking Chinese lad detached himself and ran to fetch her hired gharry from the line of waiting vehicles. Carstairs looked at him curiously as he returned and held open the door of the gharry. He was a strong little fellow with the intelligent expression of a good class Chinaman, and the healthy brown-red face of a certain type of his race.

While the gharry was rattling down the drive behind the tiny rat-tailed pony Carstairs expressed surprise.

"Where on earth have you managed to pick up a well-trained Chinese servant when you've only been here a week or two?" he demanded.

"Fah Sien is a friend of mine," Diana answered, with amusement in her voice.

There was about her something of aloofness, of personal dignity, which held impertinent questioning at bay, despite her natural candour and sincerity. He was just wondering how he could frame the next and obvious question, when he was nearly thrown into her lap by the jerk with which the gharry-wallah

pulled up his unhappy beast to make way for two Europeans just entering the gate. They were in the white evening dress of the tropics, and a flaming brazier set high on the gate-post to guide the guests into the grounds scattered its light illuminatingly upon them. Carstairs felt Diana sink back with a quick dive into her seat, the movement must have been instinctive, for had she thought she must have known she could not possibly have been seen in that dark little cubby-hole of a vehicle. As she jerked back he heard her exclaim under her breath, "Tom Marjoram!"

There was indeed no mistaking him; his tall figure loomed up beneath the flaring light which etched him out in black and white, his dark, uncovered head and big eyes showing up in contrast with his white clothes.

"Yes," Carstairs assented, "the handsomest man in Rangoon! I didn't know you had met him, though."

"I have seen him," said Diana, out of the darkness. "I have not spoken to him yet."

There was something in her tone that struck wonder into Carstairs' mind; there was almost a touch of fear, or was it a little regret, pathos? At any rate some tremor that had never before been in Diana's tone since he had known her. It lingered in his mind like an unpleasant echo. Had she and Marjoram met one another before she landed in the country?

For a long time after that neither of them spoke.

They passed from the quiet roads running through cantonments to the noisy streets of the town, much more crowded than in the daytime.

A mixed throng jostled and elbowed on the roadway,

Madrassees, Punjaubis, Bengalis, Suratis, Chittagonians, Mons, Shans, Karens, Sikhs, Pathans, Chinamen, Parsis, Armenians, Malays, and samples of many another race were herded together in a sweating, struggling mob, daily engaged in fierce competition, striving to tear the rupees from the hand that held them; ready, many of them, to kill a man for a few pice, to betray a woman in a moment's idleness. Little pen-pictures stood out here and there, detached for a moment against a living background. A Burmese boy on a cycle, with his head cropped "English fashion," wearing a soiled singlet, and a skirt ludicrously twisted around his knees, from which emerged bare legs and excruciatingly new yellow leather shoes, he was pedalling along on any side, anywhere, in amongst the mixed traffic, where gharry met gharry, head on, and either or both shaved trams at intervals without regard to the rule of the road. The gutters swarmed with children, all bright eyes and shining teeth, with odd little tufts of hair like carrot-tops, they were dressed in blue beads and an occasional bangle. As a slow bullock-cart came creaking by, the huge dumb beasts swayed this way and that, driven by a sharp goad applied by their driver crunched up on the broad pole; it was crammed with a pleasure party that had been out for the day; gauze scarves were floating, flowers waggling behind dainty ears, bangles were clattering and tongues clacking full speed, indeed a cargo of chatter and affectation, and pure human lightness of heart. In a shop piled with coloured footgear were framed three nearly naked Chinamen squatting at ease, their pigtails wound

around their skulls, their huge brawn of arm and leg disgusting in its open display.

"The Burmese seem to be the scarcest of all," said Diana presently. Then almost at once she added, as if she had not spoken, "It was odd of Mr. Marjoram to walk!"

"Why not? He lives quite near the Fyfes."

Another silence, which Mark Carstairs broke this time. "I can't think how you can stay in the hotel in this airless town," he said; "why, everything you touch is sticky with dust and heat! And you've had plenty of invitations, I know."

"We shan't be here long now," said Diana. "We've nearly completed all our preparations, but you can't go big-game shooting without a certain amount of arrangement, you know. As a matter of fact, His Excellency has been very kind, and hurried things up wonderfully."

"You know him and Lady Rodman?"

"I had an introduction to them."

"Didn't they ask you to stay?"

"Why, of course they did; they are the kindest people, but I should have been a prisoner up in that great palace of a place in the middle of that huge park; all my comings and goings accounted for—no, thank you!"

The gharry drew up at the hotel, and Ronald, who had been sitting on the verandah, came down the steps.

"I feel all over dirty," he announced. "Yet I've just had my sixth bath to-day."

Diana laughed. "Get in then, and you shall have

a plunge in the Great Lake if you like; we'll go there."

Fah Sien, who had been hanging on behind, had leaped down to hold the door.

"There's no room," said Ronald, sniffing inside the gharry. "I'd better sit on the roof. But I shan't be clean and white like Fah Sien when I'm through with it, I warn you."

"I'm getting out here," explained Carstairs hastily. "I only brought your mother home."

"If you want to get out no one can stop you," remarked Diana dispassionately.

"It's not a question of wanting, it's a question of square inches," he replied.

"Get on the roof, Ron," she said quietly.

He set one foot on the wheel and leaped up, and sat with his legs dangling over by the driver. Just as they started, with one of those dislocating jerks beloved of gharry-wallahs, he leaned over the tiny window in the side.

"Do you want some nuts?" he asked, "I've got lots."

"Aren't you afraid he'll tumble off?" asked Carstairs of Diana. "You never tell him not to do this or that, you leave him quite alone."

"Why, of course. Ronald knows how to take care of himself as well as I do. Better, really. He'd be rather a duffer of a boy if he didn't, considering his opportunities."

There wafted across Carstairs' mind an unpleasant remembrance of Mrs. Fyfe's malicious story, but it was gone as soon as it came.

They stopped at the gates of the park, and Diana, announcing her intention of walking through, instructed Fah Sien to go with the gharry-wallah to wait for them at the far end.

It was more than a month since she and Carstairs had stood together on the deck of the *Mesopotamia* in the Suez Canal, when he first mentioned his secret to her. They were reminded of it by the fact that the next moon was on the wane, only a fragment of it was left; late in its rising, it showed a murky light in the east. The subdued colour made strange splashed blobs on the oily surface of the lake as they passed along the broad road beside it.

"I suppose you'd call it unusual to do this," said Diana briskly. "If you want to go to bed, you can."

"You are much more careful of me than you are of Ronald," answered Carstairs a little crossly.

"Perhaps it's because I don't think you're so well able to take care of yourself," she responded maliciously.

"I'm not sure that you aren't right there."

Then, as they strolled along, he asked, "Have you mentioned anything about my affairs to the boy?"

"Oh, we never mention other people's confidences to each other, do we, Ron?"

"If you want to talk to mother, Mr. Carstairs," said Ronald, in a man of the world way, "I'll go ahead," and he started off.

"At the same time," exclaimed Diana, "if there is anything further you want to tell me, there's no reason in the world why Ron shouldn't hear it. I trust him more than anyone in the world, he's easily

first—there's no second—in fact, with everyone else it's a case of 'also ran.'"

That sentence annoyed Carstairs extremely; he was so much huffed he did not speak for quite a long time, until they came up with Ronald again, standing by a mass of bougainvillea growing in huge clusters on a high trellis.

"It's most odd," said Diana, in the tone of one who makes light conversation. "How the moon takes all the tone out of the flowers. In the daylight that blossom is such a glorious wine colour, it makes you feel shivery with delight, and to-night——"

"It's like the scum on stagnant water," supplied the unromantic Ronald.

But Carstairs did not laugh. "I don't know why all the confidences should be on my side," he began irrelevantly—then, greatly daring, "You mystery woman!"

Diana did not snub him as he had expected she would, she only laughed again lightly. "Mr. Marjoram has been tightening the screw again, has he?"

"No." Then, after a pause, "It's the other way, he's letting me loose, and I'd give the world to know what for! Is it a cat and mouse game, or not? I want to know how it strikes you."

"If you really want my advice," she answered, breaking off a big flowering spray, "you had better tell me word for word what he said to you."

Carstairs paused to light a cigarette, and they paced along side by side, while Ronald once more disappeared conveniently in the gloomy shadows ahead.

"It was yesterday," he began at last, speaking with a great effort. "But I'd better explain first, I've been straightening out matters in the Number 1 Godown since I got back, a hateful job. You come up against the Chinamen there, and I've not had the handling of them before. You must know there is a Chinaman here, called Min King, who, in some secret way, is a sort of king of all the Chinamen in Rangoon, at any rate of those who work here; he has apparently unlimited autocratic power over them. If he told them to come out of any mill or factory, out they would come. If he forbids it no Chinaman can get a job anywhere. This is what made me so curious as to how you got hold of Fah Sien——" He paused.

"Fah Sien is under my orders, and no one's else," said Diana, in that final tone which made it seem hopeless to question her further.

"How you did it is your look-out, but if you come up against this gentleman you may have trouble."

"How can he thwart Europeans and dictate to them?"

"I don't know how he can, but he does. He has done it for years. He is a very good-looking man, which is remarkable in one of his race, but he is quite unlike the ordinary type, small, finely made, beautifully dressed, almost like a woman. He drives about in one of the smartest turn-outs drawn by a white horse. Not a soul else has ever had a white horse here; it's like a scene out of Cinderella in a pantomime to see him driving with his richly coloured clothing behind this beautiful animal with its long tail. All

the business men of the place keep in with him or they'd get no coolies, Chinese coolies, anyway, and they're much the best for certain kinds of jobs. Yet if you ask a Chinese coolie if he knows Min King, he'll fold his hands and look like a born idiot, and not a syllable can you get out of him. It's an open secret that Min King is fabulously rich; they say every firm of any consequence subsidises him, and every coolie pays him tribute, so he gets it both ways; he owns mills, and factories, steamers, and docks, but it's not in his own name mostly, he's the power behind the throne. I'm beginning to wonder if that isn't the case with our own firm, for Marjoram is hand in glove with the Chinaman, and never seems to have much trouble in getting things done, but I've no evidence of this; indeed, the evidence at present seems the other way, for the firm's affairs are far from flourishing. I'm not betraying confidence, for that does not come in my department, and they never confide in me; I know only what is common talk throughout Rangoon. Now if Min King were really behind them they couldn't be smashed up."

"I'd like to meet Min King," said Diana.

"All this has nothing in particular to do with my trouble," Carstairs went on, speaking more easily. "Only I've had to be very careful and tactful in handling the Chinese lot in my godown. Min King comes down occasionally and walks around and inspects things as if he had the right to do so. It makes my blood boil, but I can't show any resentment or there wouldn't be a Chinaman left in the place next day."

"I'd like, I'd like very much to have a business place in Rangoon," said Diana.

"You wouldn't like it if it were Number 1 Godown," replied Carstairs warmly. "The smells lie in solid chunks, sickly stinks of rubber leaning up against real smart ones like arsenic, and permeating the whole is the never-ending stench of 'native'; there are soaking floors drenched in filth, groaning presses, raw hides to be tanned, noise and steam and mess. The only decent floor in the whole building is the one up near the roof where the rice and dry stuffs are stacked. I was there yesterday when, to my great surprise, Marjoram himself came to me, said he'd just been looking round to see how things were going, and wanted a talk with me. He took me back to his own office, and there, very seriously, and in a most friendly way, as if I were quite on his own footing, he asked me how I liked my work there. I said 'not at all,' and then he told me that they are not satisfied with a manager of theirs whom they had sent up the Chindwin to look after an estate they've got there. It's an experimental estate that the firm bought a year or two back. They've made a clearing, and are growing small quantities of various things, such as cutch and tobacco and so on. They call it the MF. Estate, from the initials of the two partners. He said they thought of bringing the man back to be under their own more immediate supervision here, and if I liked they would make me the offer of his position there. The screw is a little better than what I'm getting, and I should be boss, with no one over me on the spot; anyway, I should have no daily intercourse with those two——"

"Why do you so hate Tom Marjoram?"

"There you ask me a hard question; I'm not accustomed to probing my feelings for reasons, as you are."

"But there must be some reason."

"I can only tell you this, Fyfe has tried again and again to get round me in the matter of my invention. He's lied and cheated. He's been through my private papers behind my back. He's treated me to galling tyranny, he's bribed me openly; I've had a lot to do with Fyfe, I know him inside out. Now on the other hand Marjoram has never mentioned the matter to me, he's always treated me as an equal so far as manners go. I've had very little to do with him, and yet I tell you I loathe the man, the feeling I have toward Fyfe simply doesn't count in comparison."

"You fear him because you don't understand him."

There was no sudden disclaimer; on the contrary, Carstairs considered what she said dispassionately. "I'm not afraid of anything he can do to me," he said at last; "but the man has no inside to him, he's the mask of a beautiful devil, he feels no pity, no love, no remorse like normal men; you couldn't get a mark on him if you tried. If you had him down under your heel he wouldn't be humiliated. I believe he really is the incarnation of a devil."

"Supposing there is something to be said on their side?"

"What!"

"Don't be so indignant, I'm merely trying to be perfectly just; after all you *did* sign that you would give them——"

"Only the rights of any invention I patented," broke in Mark hotly. "Luckily for me they weren't quite clever enough to foresee what happened, they framed the words themselves. I am entirely within my rights in refusing to patent."

"Wait! Hush!" she said with upraised hand, and they stopped their slow pacing.

Far off from the distance of the outlying villages came the barking of pariah dogs. The stillness was such that not a leaf moved. Even here the taste of the smoky dust was in their mouths, that peculiar taste of wood ash so distinctive of the East. The lurid quarter moon had risen higher, and the air was charged with a weird orange light that keyed the spirit up to the expectancy of unusual things. There was portent and menace abroad. Diana, who had a highly developed sensibility to external surroundings, felt it twanging through her as if someone had swept a hand across all the strings of her being.

"'The time when screech-owls cry and ban-dogs howl
And spirits walk and ghosts break up their graves,'"

she quoted, in a half whisper. "I feel as if you and I were caught in a web of dangerous influences. One could believe that something was coming toward us, something vague and intangible, but terrible. It's the same sort of feeling that one has before a thunderstorm, only much more intense and penetrating. That Chinaman Min King, with his mysterious power, and the beautiful devil Tom Marjoram, are working against us. Oh, yes, he is a devil; you've said it quite truly; and it's wonderful, because you couldn't know as I know, you must just have felt it in your

bones. 'To and fro upon the earth seeking whom he may devour.' What a horribly empty life, never to feel, to suffer, to love, to grieve! Oh, what a husk of a life!" Then she ended up on another note with a quick transition of mood. "Have you ever met a ban-dog?"

"Hallo, you two," said Ronald cheerfully, emerging from somewhere. "Have you had your confab? I'm getting rather fed up with this place. Let's go and have a look at the Great Golden Pagoda by moonlight."

Diana laughed, and the mood of inspiration vanished as if it had never been. It had been wholly unlike her as Carstairs had so far known her; he had hitherto found her so matter-of-fact and practical, and, as he had supposed, unimaginative. He felt that she must have been moved to the very depths by something, and one sentence of hers remained in his mind as a possible key; she had said, in speaking of Marjoram, "as I know him." What did she know of him? What was the connection? Yet for the life of him he, Mark Carstairs, dared not ask her; he felt himself up against a barrier there.

As they turned to rejoin the gharry, to fall in with Ronald's suggestion, he said instead: "You haven't advised me whether I should accept this Chindwin offer or not?"

"It's a trap."

"When are you leaving Rangoon yourselves?"

"In two days now perhaps."

"And where do you go first?"

Diana halted suddenly with one foot on the step,

and looked straight at him. "To the Chindwin," she said, in a very small voice.

"You? Hang traps, say I! The wary can avoid them!"

"I ought never to have told you; I knew what the result would be."

"I'm not Ronald, of course; you should have saved me from myself," he exclaimed bitterly.

"May I tell Ron?"

"Tell him anything you like; you trust him, don't you?" As he helped her into the gharry he added under his breath, "But you can't trust me."

"I have trusted you," she said indignantly. "Not a soul except you and Sir Everard Rodman know we are going to the Chindwin. I have managed to keep it strictly secret even in a gossipy place like this. Get in and don't be foolish, you'll have to escort us to the pagoda anyway."

"I'm glad you told me."

"The Chindwin is wide," suggested Diana, "or long, perhaps I had better say, there is plenty of room on its banks for people who wish to avoid each other."

"But a chance for those who don't!"

At the pagoda silence reigned, a few reedy notes from a thin pipe struck out somewhere with a shrill sweetness, as if Pan had come down amid the palmyra groves to peep at the strangers. Then they died away again. The little party climbed up under the dark shadowed roof of the mounting stairway, where the lingering odour of sandal-wood and the thanaka powder, with which the gracious little maidens of Burma make soft their warm clear complexions, was

so strong that one might almost imagine they were there still, invisible, flitting behind the dark red pillars. But their stalls of trinkets, paper flags, tapers, sweetmeats, and gold leaf had vanished, and the shadows softened the garishness of the daylight scene; the heaps of untidy litter, the horrible red betel stains, the dust and soiled cracks were covered up with a kindly veil, so that Ronald, holding his mother's arm and tripping or striding to compass the shallow, uneven stairs, exclaimed: "It's much best like this!"

They came out on to the deserted platform with the sense of being in a crowd yet seeing no one. "It's quite uncanny," Diana declared, "the place is haunted. I am positively jostled by people who are invisible."

"They must be benevolent spirits anyway," Carstairs murmured, "the other sort are supposed to be antagonised by seeing the frightful monsters at the entrance, and so they keep away. One can't believe such a sacred place could have much attraction for them anyhow."

"Do you believe in sacred places?"

"I feel that where age-long prayers to whatever god have continually been uttered there must be some sort of drawing-down of the curtain from above," he explained.

They passed round the base of the great golden stupa on the platform, looking up at its towering finger swinging into the blue spaces of the sky.

"Wouldn't I like to be up there," said Ronald, enviously eyeing the gaudy cage, which at this distance looked as if made of filaments of spider's web

It was after one o'clock and the moon, still not high, gave an eerie appearance to the platform, bestrewn with the lengthened shadows of the many irregular pinnacles and pediments. They peered into the shrines where they found only one belated Burman, squatting with folded hands before an irregular row of dirty little wax tapers he had stuck to the ground by their own grease. Before him, rising out of the zone of their feeble light, was the impassive alabaster figure of a mighty Buddha. The Burman looked so small, and crouched so humbly in his white jacket, as he crouched with his brown hands upraised before his pitiful smudged candles to the serene majesty of that untouched and untouchable smile on the lips of the man-made image, that Diana's tender heart was touched unspeakably, she drew the others away. "Don't watch him, it's cruel," she protested.

They passed round to the raised wooden rests at the back of the shrines, which were of wood, and stood a foot or two from the ground, and here they found the explanation of the solitary Burman being up there so late at night. For his family were huddled together asleep amid their belongings on one of the platforms. Evidently a country family who had come in for some festival, and were putting up here for the night. They were swathed in wrappings and lay immovable.

"They might be Chinese dead with the drug," said Diana, surveying the log-like figures outlined beneath the wraps.

"You have seen them then? Where?"

"You certainly have a habit of asking what you

want to know," she replied jauntily. "Shall we say in the opium dens of Shanghai? Is that picturesque enough to please you?"

"It doesn't please me at all to think of you in connection with such places."

"But I have a fellow feeling for the victims who resort there. Who was it who said, 'But for the grace of God——'"

"You have never tried opium?" Mark asked startled.

"That does not happen to be my especial temptation, but I can sympathise with the irresistible fascination which draws you on to something you know well you should avoid."

"You!" he exclaimed almost rudely. "I cannot imagine your self-possession giving way."

And then Fah Sien stood before them with head bent, hands folded. His mistress, seeing he had something to communicate, went near to him and spoke in tones too low for the others to hear, then she turned to Mark, and he saw that her expression was serious. "Is there any other way of going down than the main entrance by which we came up?" she asked him.

"Not one that you could manage."

"Speak very low. We must go; and there is someone here whom I don't want to meet. Guide us, Fah Sien."

The Chinaman glided in front, and they followed him round the outer edge of the great platform at the back of the shrines. Presently he stopped and made a signal to them to wait, while he passed through

between two temples to peer out at the huge level spaces lying at the foot of the pagoda.

"Who is it?" Ronald asked his mother in a whisper, but he got no answer.

Fah Sien returned almost instantly and beckoned. "Come fast, lady."

They advanced swiftly, and as they emerged from behind the shrines into the open Carstairs heard the noise of European boots and the sound of men's voices on the further side of the great stupa. He judged that to gain the head of the dark decline leading outwards, before the owners came round into sight, they would have to be very quick, so he seized Diana's elbow and urged her forward, but they were not quick enough, or they made some noise that betrayed them, for just as they had almost reached the entrance they heard strides fast approaching, and knew that they were caught.

It hardly needed Marjoram's, "Hallo, Carstairs! Seeing the Shwe Dagon by moonlight also?" to tell him who was the man Diana sought to avoid, he had guessed that at once.

Diana quickly instructed him as to her wishes by saying, "Introduce me;" and he followed her lead at once.

"I have had the pleasure of showing Mrs. Forbes what the pagoda looks like by moonlight," he said, turning to his employer with a quiet dignity that had not been apparent in him before. "Mrs. Forbes, may I introduce Mr. Marjoram to you? He is Mr. Fyfe's partner."

Diana bowed. "I must say I have found the sight

well worth while," she said, in a perfectly natural voice. "I ran away from Mrs. Fyfe's party because I did not wish to leave my boy, Ronald, alone any longer."

The whole party passed down the incline together; Mrs. Forbes and Marjoram leading, followed by the others, including the man from Bassein, whom Marjoram had not troubled to introduce.

"Is this your first visit to Rangoon, Mrs. Forbes?" Marjoram asked in a polite society manner.

"It is. Don't ask me what I think of it, because I'm afraid I should disappoint you, as one of the inhabitants who have made it what it is."

They spoke as strangers. Carstairs, following, was keenly alive to that.

"You are not going to be here long?"

"I think not."

"You will probably be going up to see Mandalay?"

"We ought to. We may not have time before we leave."

"Where do you think of going next?"

"Siam," said Diana readily. "I have always had a fancy to visit Siam."

"You may be induced perhaps to extend your journey to China; China is a very interesting country."

"So I have always understood."

He laughed. They had reached the foot of the stairs, and were standing by the waiting gharry. Diana turned to Carstairs.

"It's been very nice of you to show me round," she said graciously, but in her most aloof manner. "The East is the only place where one feels the need of a

sahib." She held out her hand, leaving him no option but to take his dismissal. "Get in, Ron," she went on. "Good-bye, Mr. Marjoram, it was so clever of you to find us." The spice of wickedness that had crept into her tone had been obviously irresistible, Marjoram responded to it at once.

"You are very elusive," he said. "Half a dozen times within this last fortnight have I been on the point of meeting you, only to find you had vanished, so I was determined to run you to earth this time."

"I really thought I could depend on Mrs. Fyfe to hold you tight!"

"It wasn't easy to break away," he admitted. "But—I generally do what I mean to—in the end."

The gharry started off, and Fah Sien, who had been invisible since Marjoram's advent, was yet hanging on to the board at the back when they arrived at the hotel.

CHAPTER V

THE MF. ESTATE

MARK CARSTAIRS was installed in the bungalow belonging to Marjoram and Fyfe's experimental estate up the Chindwin. The bungalow was a very plain affair, made of the material most usual in the country, namely, teak wood. It was reached by a flat step-ladder leading from the ground to the verandah, which was the living-room; from this, two doorways without doors led into two bedrooms. Each bedroom was completed by a tiny bathroom built out at the side, standing on its own stilts. The floors of these rooms were liberally bored with holes, so that the tin bath was emptied by the simple process of pouring it out and letting the water descend in soapy streams below. The water was still running through the holes of Carstairs' bedroom when he himself, spruce and clean, appeared for his late breakfast in the living-room. He had been his morning rounds very early, and now as the sun got hot was ready for his food and office work.

He had brought with him two personal servants, a cook and a Burmese boy, Moung Ka, who was devoted to him, and had consented in his case to waive the dislike of his race to such service. Moung Ka was

in the cook-house at the back of the bungalow, waiting to bring in the breakfast. From where he sat Carstairs could see the compound in front, surrounded by a spiked palisade wattled with thorn, a really formidable obstacle in case of any unexpected attack. There were some large indaing trees close beside the building, but the compound was of bare brown earth, beaten flat. In one corner was what looked like a rough red carpet of brilliant colouring. This was a collection of chillies spread out in the sun to dry. The ground outside was uneven, falling away in places, and the site for the bungalow had evidently been selected with care, as it was on a small hill, so that from the verandah some of the surrounding country could be seen over the top of the stockade. The view included a gigantic rolled-up mass of bush, from which a few thatch roofs appeared, and some green leaved shining plants, topped by a few areca palms and the dense foliage of great jack trees. This was the village where the coolies working on the estate lived. They were not pure Burmans, though they called themselves so, but a mixed race caused by intermarrying with the Chin tribes. Their stockade was not so scientifically constructed as that surrounding the bungalow, but it had been helped by a quantity of earth, shovelled up into a bank, in which many of the fast-growing plants had been wattled to form the palisade, and these had taken root and covered it with a bower of tangled green and brown.

The whole camp was surrounded on three sides by jungle, rolling up the great hill slopes, but the fourth lay open to an undulating valley, the further end of

which rested on the river. This was the valley which had been cleared for cultivation.

The neighbourhood was not new to Carstairs, for he had been up here before on prospecting expeditions, the last time with Tom Marjoram before the site was finally settled; he could speak the mixed Burmese of the coolies, and directly he had once more arrived in the "wilderness" after a long and trying contact with the life of towns, he had felt as if a burden had fallen from his back, for he was one of those to whom solitude is a natural and congenial state, to be varied only occasionally by the society of his fellows. The man Davis, whom he had superseded, had not been at all sorry to hand over, for he was of a coarser stamp, who had no resources in himself, and rested purely on the extraneous excitement supplied by the emotions of others.

"Deadly hole," had been his greeting to Carstairs. "Except that the screw is not so good in Rangoon, I am altogether glad to quit it; what you'll find to do with yourself, I don't know—gives me the jim-jams."

"There is sport in the neighbourhood?"

"Yes, I got an occasional day off, but it's no fun by yourself."

Carstairs had laughed, for he, being a real sportsman at heart, knew that the lore of the wild came only to the solitary being who was content to wait and watch in silence.

The first fortnight had passed quickly enough, as there was a good deal to learn before Davis went down the river highway; but now he had gone, and for the last few days Carstairs had enjoyed the peace that

comes with the removal of all irritating outside influences. He was more imaginative than Diana Forbes gave him credit for being, and he had speculated more than a little on the reason for his being thus ostracised; was he still in the web? On the outside edge it might be, but tangled enough to reveal to the great spider sitting in the centre by any tremor that he was exhausted and ready to give in without a struggle. And who was the spider? Was it really Tom Marjoram, with his European traditions to keep him from being brutal, or was it not rather that floss-silk Chinaman who acknowledged no limits to his appetite? There was at least one satisfying thought to fall back upon: it was not his death these plotters desired, there was no fear of a sudden attack of agonising pain owing to something having been put into his food by order, so that the body could be quickly buried out of the way here, where none could ask unpleasant questions or exhume it in time to gain evidence were suspicion aroused. Men died so suddenly in the jungle, and had to be disposed of so quickly, that had that been the object of his enemies he would have been in peril indeed. On the contrary, so long as his brain held the secret they were eager to get, his life was as precious to them as it was to himself, and here out in the open he could easily discern any symptoms of pressure being put upon him to reveal the secret. So far there was nothing, and he was at liberty to rejoice in his immunity, and to revel in the pure air and silence after the loathsome sights and sounds and smells of Number 1 Godown.

The only pricking sensation that remained was an

almost continuous one, though hardly as yet recognised for what it was by his full consciousness. The symptoms might easily have forewarned him had he had the least experience of the disease, for do what he would, start what train of thought he would, his mind inevitably bent back to the one subject—the woman he had so recently met. As water finds its level, as streams trickle downward to the sea, so his train of thought starting from his own affairs, from Marjoram, from the Chinaman, from his precious invention, invariably led to Diana, a great sea of thought and speculation from which he emerged again with difficulty.

He had not been able to say good-bye to her; that was where the pricking sensation at first focussed. He had called at the hotel the day following the pagoda episode, but she was out. He had fruitlessly visited the Gymkhana Club, the Point, and all the places where society assembled. He had expected some notice to be taken of the card he had left, a line of invitation or of farewell, but he had received none. He had called again two days later to find that she had left for up-country, but no one knew where.

All the time on his way north he had questioned those likely to know. He had journeyed first in one of the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company's steamers, and then changed at Pakkoku into the little launch belonging to the MF. Estate. But he had heard nothing. He had begun to fear that he was not the exception he had hoped out of all the world, and that into his eyes as well as the rest had Diana thrown dust. Had he not heard her distinctly tell Tom Marjoram she was

going to Siam ? Perhaps it was he, Carstairs, who had been befooled, and not Marjoram ! Maybe she had never gone to the Chindwin at all, but merely said so, when she had heard of his destination, from some strange reason of her own. She was so mysterious, so unfathomable, that he felt he was a long way from understanding her yet ; this was quite the kind of thing he must be prepared for. But if it were indeed so, and she had passed out of his life as suddenly as she had entered it, what then ? It would be intolerable, and he was not the man to stand it : he had no intention of standing it. Patience he had ; he could wait, wait until he came safely through the next year ; then, when he was free, with his precious secret as a safety float, he would be able to breast the sea of life and find her wherever she was. He had some clues ; and a woman of so notable a personality could not easily hide.

He would make her see that he was to be reckoned with, not merely to be played with for a little while, then thrown aside. He would force himself into her life until she could not do without him. It was hardly likely she would marry in the interval ; she did not seem a marrying sort ; and as yet he had no definite idea of asking her to marry him, his financial position was too undefined for that ; only he had a strong and most compelling desire to make himself so necessary to her that she would turn to him and confide in him above anyone else in the world, even before Ronald. Ronald was, of course, all very well, a fine lad, and as she must have some sort of safety-valve it was better so to use her own son than another ;

but Ronald was only a boy, she needed a man in her life.

If only he had, say, two thousand a year, he would have gone off at once—now—to be there beside her whenever she needed anyone. He wouldn't be jealous, he wouldn't bother her, but just be there always, until she had learned to turn to him, to rely on him, and when she did he would never fail her. However, after all, it only meant a little longer waiting. His invention ought easily to bring in two thousand a year once properly handled. With that his mind strayed away on the only subject that rivalled, or more correctly, approached, Mrs. Forbes in interest.

The delightful freedom, here, away from spies, away from that horrible suspicion which compelled him to be on his guard every minute, allowed him at least to indulge himself in thinking of it. Moung Ka was a long time bringing the breakfast. So, almost automatically, Carstairs reached for a writing-pad and began, slowly and carefully, drawing with detail, as he had not dared to do for months, the design and working of his beautiful thing. With the absorption of the monomaniac he had no sooner put pencil to paper than he lost himself entirely in the mental world. The bungalow, the chuckling of the house lizards, the squawk of the great crows outside in the sunlight, were all as if they were not. Firmly and carefully he added line to line and stroke to stroke. Never at Rangoon had he been able to do this, except furtively and in a hurry; the satisfaction was as all-absorbing as that of the drug-taker restored to his drug after abstinence.

The principle of compensatory balance, that was the whole secret; once they had got on to that they might make something of it; but even that was only a principle—one could not patent a principle, it was the machine that would carry it out that counted. Like all great discoveries it was absurdly simple, but —priceless. The satisfaction he felt in going again over the lines of the design was that of reassurance. He had, many a time, demanded of himself if he were living in a fool's paradise, and would awake to reality, finding his idea useless; but whenever he was able to get at it, reassurance flowed in, for he could detect no flaw. Odd, amazing was it that no one had ever been able to do this simple little job before, when machines, all but human, followed out much more intricate evolutions in almost every department of life. It was the uneven size of the nuts to be cracked that caused the trouble, and the necessity for not breaking or bruising the fragile things in the process. At present the cracking was all done by hand, an interminable labour. Carstairs had seen women kneeling at the work in rows on the floor. The cost of their labour was truly not great in detail, but the slowness of the method made it amount to a considerable sum in the aggregate, and in these days of fine competition anything weighing down the balance sheet might make the whole difference between bankruptcy and a dividend. So he sketched and shaded and drew, utterly absorbed.

So absorbed was he that when a sort of palanquin, carried on men's shoulders, stopped at the foot of the step-ladder, and there alighted in silence, a neat little

Chinaman, some five feet four in height, who climbed the steps slowly without a sound, he still did not look up. The Chinaman's head appeared above the floor level, like a half-closed peony, in its gorgeous silk cap, with a long fine pigtail for the stalk at the back. Then, suddenly, the largest of the house lizards gave a great gulping "Tuck—too!" so violent, that it made even the plan-drawer leap; he looked up to laugh and then he saw——

Not four paces from him the small figure, rich in its glorious many-coloured silks, quaint and bowing, and he sprang to his feet with a great cry, "Min King!" Involuntarily his hand went down on the pad and he turned it face over. "I thought you were six or seven hundred miles away."

"Good morning, Mr. Carstairs," said the newcomer bowing, and emphasising by his rather exaggerated courtesy the lack of it on the part of the other.

Carstairs did not respond. He stood there blankly, full of suspicion, while the dark cloud which had so recently rolled away from his shoulders enveloped him again in its folds.

"You have not then received the telegram which Mr. Marjoram sent to forewarn you of my arrival?" continued the Chinaman blandly.

Here then was the answer to the question he had asked himself. This was the spider; not Marjoram or another!

It occurred to Carstairs that he had never really seen the Chinaman in a good light before, possibly it was that he had never examined him; in the warehouse he had always carefully avoided paying him

that compliment. Min King's silky politeness had invariably the effect of making him particularly bluff and rude.

Min King was small for his race, with none of that roly-poly roundness of limb which characterises so many of his fellow-countrymen. He was fine all over, recalling in some odd way the spun glass out of which china peacock's tails are sometimes made. His thin pigtail was black, and so were his well-defined eyebrows, yet it was easy to see he was an albino. His hair underneath that tight silk cap, what there was of it, must have been like slender filaments grown in a cellar. His eyes were actually pale-blue in tint, and glinted hard like some crystal. He was extraordinarily good-looking for a Chinaman, in spite of his defects, for there was hardly more than a touch of almond shape in his eyelids, and his nose was well-defined and good in line; his face had the clear outlines and almost the dead whiteness of a cameo. In spite of the Chinaman's reverence for his ancestors, which would prevent his ever admitting the fact himself, his whole appearance proclaimed that there must have been a cross with alien blood somewhere in the line. Carstairs remembered saying something of the sort to Fyfe the first time he ever set eyes on Min King, without having any idea what an educated and subtle man he referred to, "Cross between an Italian greyhound and a ferret," he had said aside; "can't be a pure-blooded Chinaman, must have a bar sinister somewhere."

Min King altered his position a little under the close and silent scrutiny with which he was focussed, and

Carstairs saw his eyes flash red like rubies beneath the shadow of the sloping roof.

"Certainly the ferret," he thought to himself. "Sit down," he said aloud, "I'm just going to breakfast. Ah, here's the boy at last. Bring more plates, chow-chow, for Min King."

"Bringing, Thakin," cried Moung Ka.

Min King prided himself on being wholly European when with Europeans. He sat on chairs and ate European food, but to-day he declined the hospitality offered, declaring he had already breakfasted.

"How did you get here?"

"I came on the MF. launch which has returned from taking Mr. Davis to Pakkoku."

"Why, of course, she's due to-day; I forgot."

Carstairs caught sight as he spoke of a peon, extending upward a telegram in a cleft stick from the foot of the stairs, shiko-ing meantime. He had come across the river in a sampan with it from the nearest office. He strode across and took it.

"Min King coming on business for us; please assist him in every way." It was, as he had expected, the delayed telegram from Marjoram. It struck him as another instance of the diabolical cleverness with which this game was being worked that the telegram had actually, as dated, been sent off in time for him to have received it two days ago, when he would have been forewarned, but it had not been delivered until now, when he had been taken by surprise. How did they manage these things?

"Then your business is not with me?" he queried abruptly, as he passed on the message verbally.

"Not altogether, but I must ask you to be so good as to put me up here until I can make other arrangements."

Carstairs looked at him gravely. "The whole place is at your disposal," said he, but without a trace of either irony or suavity in his voice. He felt already the threads of the web shaking as the spider in the middle bestirred itself, and made a movement toward the entangled victim. It was absurd, of course; he asked himself what could the silken Chinaman do? But he felt uneasy nevertheless.

As Min King was European in his habits there could be no possible objection to associating with him on account of his manners, which indeed were perfect. He waited now until Carstairs had finished breakfast. Then his own boy brought him tea, served in a priceless porcelain cup without a handle. He accepted the cigarette which Carstairs handed him, when he produced his own, and Carstairs thought with inward amusement no one could possibly tell from his manner whether he was enjoying or detesting it. He then fumbled in the soft folds of his gown and produced a letter, which he handed across. It was addressed to his host in Marjoram's handwriting. The letter, too, was handwritten in the same clear running script, and the gist of it was soon gathered.

Min King, it appeared, was about to take up land in the Chindwin district on his own account, and had a fancy to look at a section which Marjoram and Carstairs had surveyed and considered before finally appropriating that now being developed.

"It is that lot on the Yawtha," Marjoram wrote;

"a couple of days' journey westward of MF. We finally rejected it because we thought the transport difficulties would be greater, you will remember. But it has points. He has all the necessary papers from the Government if he finally decides on it. I am anxious for him to do so. He comes as an ally not a rival, and it will be better to have him there than a more objectionable neighbour. There are many expenses of transport we might share together and so lessen cost. The Yawtha, as you know, flows into the Myittha below the rock barrier. Give him therefore every assistance in your power. I don't ask you to go with him, because I think you will have your hands full at present; but if you can give him any advice it would be helpful, and you can see to the providing of coolies for transport across the intervening hills, as elephants are not feasible. Thus we shall place him under an obligation from the start. Words mean nothing to Orientals, but in my experience they never forget actions."

Carstairs folded the letter and smoked thoughtfully. Had he not allowed his precious invention to loom too large in his thoughts so that his mind was unbalanced in regard to it? Was it in the least likely that such a huge bluff as the idea of taking up an estate here would be played to secure it? Hardly. Of course, there was just the possibility that Min King might have been sent up without notice in order to snare the secret at the first onset, and it would certainly have been very awkward if he, Carstairs, had been so unwary as to leave his sketch plans lying out on the table while he was away in the fields when the China-

man arrived. But the idea of Min King taking this long journey on so slight a chance might assuredly be dismissed as absurd. At any rate that slight chance had not come off, and now he was warned he certainly would not leave such information about again while Min King was in the neighbourhood.

"Marjoram says you want to take up land to clear westward by the Yawtha," he said at last.

Min King bowed.

"You will find the natives over there a rough lot, I fancy," he went on. "They are bad enough here, but call themselves Burmans, and have some Burman characteristics; they are much more Chin over there."

"I have some influence with the Head-man at Alonzat," Min King remarked.

"Alonzat? Yes, that's on the Yawtha; I suppose that would be your nearest village on the other side." He was asking himself where had the Chinaman not "influence"? He looked at his long thin waxy fingers, with the beak-like nails scrupulously clean, which elongated them still more; obviously the owner of such hands had never done and could not do a stroke of physical work himself, and that frail little body, which appeared as if it could be crushed like an egg-shell in a strong hand-grip, what strange force lay hidden in it? Yet power there was, secret, indomitable power, that moved vast forces flowing around the actions of other men, power to which mere physical force was casual and clumsy.

"Do you want me to come with you?" he asked at last.

"If you could do so, it would, of course, be advantageous for me, but the crops——"

"The crops aren't bothering much just now, and we get no wild elephants to trouble us in the cold weather. Would you like to look round later? I usually do some of the accounts and correspondence now."

"With pleasure, whenever you are ready."

With that Min King retired to the bedroom in which his attendants had placed his things. Carstairs had a glimpse into it, and was startled to see how it had been transformed; it looked to him almost like a bazaar with its rich hangings and cushions. Odd how much luxury this despot of an Oriental race thought necessary for his comfort! He was well served too. He never seemed to give an order, and yet everything he desired was ready to his hand; his own servants, pure Chinese, moved noiselessly and expertly to adjust the rude environment to their fragile lord.

Carstairs had plenty of time to ruminate on the question of his going across to the Yawtha during the afternoon, and he often found himself, pen in hand, gazing out lost in thought, with his eyes fixed on that rough red patch of chillies. He had most carefully and effectively destroyed his precious plan by burning, and he could hardly see what pressure an Oriental like Min King could put upon him to cause him to reveal it. Carstairs had promised himself a day's sport so soon as ever he had got matters in train; but now, of course, that must be postponed until he was rid of his most undesired visitor. He must discover when that would be.

Therefore when Min King joined him at the tea-table about four o'clock he put the question to him bluntly.

"I should be glad to start as soon as ever the necessary transport can be arranged," answered the Chinaman.

"Do you know anything about the district?"

A most unexpected and surprising wave of some repellent force seemed to flow from the Chinaman for a moment, something so strong that Carstairs felt as if he were being almost thrust away, and at the same time very loudly and clearly in his mind sounded the tocsin, "Do not go with him."

There had been a sudden flicker of the light eyelashes so strangely at variance with the dark-pencilled brows, and then the Chinaman answered, smoothly, as was his wont.

"I have been in the district before, but there is nothing to draw one here except the sport. It is usually your countrymen who invade these hills for that purpose, but not often a countrywoman."

"Mrs. Forbes?" had slipped out of Carstairs' mouth before he intended, and then he was sorry.

"It is a lady who has come out from England with her young son. I heard of them in my journey up. They essayed the Myittha, but were held up below the rocks. I was told that they are now in the Yawtha."

With tremendous resolution Carstairs set a seal on his lips and refrained from saying any more on that topic. "If you are ready," he said, rising with studied nonchalance, "I think we had better make our rounds, as the light soon goes."

It was a curious procession that threaded the narrow ways between the trenches and irrigation canals. First, Carstairs, in his holland suit and khaki helmet, for the sun was still strong, and behind him in an open seat like a throne Min King, sitting upright, in a gown of blue-handworked designs on an indigo ground. He looked like some saint of old as depicted in a stained-glass window. His cap might have been the aura, for it was of ruddy silk; his pure, sedate, rather meagre outlines were of the Botticelli type. He was borne aloft on the shoulders of two sturdy men, with the muscles of elephants. They were not pure Chinamen, but of mixed Shan and Yunnanese blood from Bhamo way. Their rounded treacle-coloured shoulders supported the chair as on rubber pads, and the weight was to them no more than the harness to a horse.

The irregular ridges and bosses and spurs of hill, clothed with forest growth, surrounded the valley, protruding into it as headlands into the sea. For the most part the trees were not of great size, but thickly foliaged oak, padauk and ironwood; here and there a gigantic Ficus Elastica rose like Gulliver among the Lilliputians, towering to an enormous height. In the valley, wherever it had not been cleared, there was the kaing grass growing untidily, and forming a fringe for the crops. In the vegetable department were peas, chillies, tomatoes, gourds, melons, and onions, grown for use and not for sale, but it was toward the more expensive and profitable crops that Carstairs led the way. In a tobacco patch, where the seedlings were being planted out in drills three feet apart, was

a light-hearted crew of coolies, men and women. Though they called themselves Burmans they did not bear much resemblance to their brethren of the towns. They were much darker in colour, coarser in feature, and were dressed in garments of a muddy hue that in some cases still showed they had started their career as the mixed red of a duster. The women carried their cloths fastened across above the breasts, and under the armpits, and the men had tucked up their skirts into loin-cloths; they jested and chattered as they worked, and looked up with beaming smiles overspreading their broad, good-humoured faces when they saw their "boss" approaching. But one small group was too much preoccupied to give such a greeting, for among them an old hag was screaming wildly at a youth who hid himself shamefacedly behind his comrades. Her voice rose shriller and shriller without pause or intake of breath, and when they came within range Carstairs stopped a moment to listen, then shouted out something in the native tongue to the youth, a thin lad, evidently but newly arrived at the dignity of tattooed legs. The boy bounded forward, and, pulling a shrivelled onion from his waistcloth, handed it to the old woman with the air of a prince. A roar of laughter followed, as the old body, shaking her fist at them all, and turning now and again to send back a stream of invective, toddled off fast toward the village with the precious onion she had retrieved from the graceless young thief.

Carstairs led his guest to where the betel vines were trained on bamboo lattice work, set up in water channels about a yard apart, and then to the areca nursery,

a pleasant place, shaded by the glossy leaves of the plantains, and the thick foliage of the lime trees planted to protect the young shoots. There was sugar-cane nearly ready for cutting, but the most valuable and important crop of all was the cutch. Mark's boots stuck to the wet soil as he walked, and he slithered now and again, but the bare-footed men who carried the chair never made a false step; their enormous feet left marks like those of a plantigrade on the moistened soil.

They made a complete survey, following the narrow tracks, passing at times even on to the slopes of the hills where the tough, broad leaves of the trees made thick shade. Here and there one turned to a brilliant crimson hung out its banner like a flag of danger. The idea occurred to Carstairs himself, as one flaunted ahead with suddenness, and in defiant opposition to its warning he exclaimed, suddenly, and without any previous context to the Chinaman following:

"I will come with you, Min King, to the Yawtha, so soon as we can get the coolies together."

CHAPTER VI

MIN KING TAKES A HAND

"I REALLY don't see what it has to do with you, Min King," said Carstairs.

He was sitting in a green canvas chair in a clearing of the forest. As the servants passed to and from the cooking fires to the table spread before the tents, the thick dry leaves which had fallen from the evergreen trees crackled under their feet. There were not many mosquitoes here, and the night was just pleasantly cool; as the party climbed higher it would get distinctly chilly. The two, so ill-assorted, had dined comfortably from a curry of jungle fowl and the partridges which had fallen to Carstairs' gun on the day's march; it had been served up with green Indian corn and edible shoots.

These had been followed by a hideous attempt at a pudding, rolling in "native" sweetness and faintly tasting of kerosene. Carstairs had long forbidden his cook to try his hand at sweets, for though he was skilled in making savouries, his powers ceased there; but evidently he had decided that a night out in the jungle was a sort of *tamasha*, and had let himself go to the summit of his ambition. Min King had politely refused to touch the pudding, and Carstairs, after one

mouthful, had shouted for the lugalé, and told him to see that the cook ate every spoonful of it himself, as a deterrent from further enterprises of the kind.

The cook and the boy, Moung Ka, were his only personal servants, though he, like Min King, had had to enrol a large number of coolies, because in the rough tangle, covering precipitous slopes, where they were going, elephants would have been useless.

Coffee had just been served, made admirably by Moung Ka, who prided himself on this accomplishment, for he could concoct it exactly to the thakin's liking; and the two men sipping it sat not three feet from each other in space, but divided in thoughts, aims, and ideals as far asunder as one star from another.

Min King had just referred to the difficult position the firm of Marjoram and Fyfe had found themselves in, and Carstairs had promptly answered him.

"As you say," said the Chinaman after a long pause, "it is not of my business. Perhaps, though, from time to time there may have been some small sums, not required by me, which the Heads of the firm have found useful."

"You mean you've lent them money? I rather thought as much. But even if they do go bankrupt, what can it matter to you? What are such 'small sums' to a man of your wealth?"

The Chinaman spread his transparent tapery hands horizontally, as if he were stroking the surface of something very smooth and glossy.

"Men say that I am rich. What is it to be rich? To have money. I have no money. I own certainly many other things, such as ships, mills, factories, but

the money they make they eat, there is none to play with."

"I understand you know the firm are on the verge of going smash," said Carstairs, interpreting in his own direct way, "and that you have no intention of saving them. Nevertheless, as you know so much, I gather you are inside. More inside than myself, in fact, for I have no direct knowledge of the situation; I've had my suspicions, of course, though outwardly everything seems to be humming."

"It is most necessary," said Min King, "that public confidence in them should receive some bright support."

"From which I judge that they've put you on to get something out of me. You can stop before you begin."

"I do not understand of what you are talking."

"Just as well," thought Carstairs. "Still two can play a game of bluff, and I don't mind taking a hand." Aloud he continued, "I thought possibly one of them had been filling you up with a foolish notion they've got that I have some invention up my sleeve that would revolutionise the world. They are obsessed with it, don't seem able to let it alone."

"Indeed," said Min King blandly, "and it is not true?"

"As we are talking confidences under the trees," Carstairs went on, ignoring the question, "I don't mind asking you, can you guess why I went to England?"

He knew enough of Orientals to be certain he would never get a direct answer; even the Burmans, frankest

of Orientals, have no absolute "yes" in their vocabulary, but repeat the question as an affirmative. For the moment the oblique style of conversation suited Carstairs admirably.

"I might guess one thousand times, and again one thousand, without coming near the truth," responded Min King. "How can one of my race, however he is educated, tell what is in the mind and thoughts of an Englishman?"

"Well, suppose my journey to England was not unconnected with this idea which Marjoram and Fyfe are so keen on, and suppose when I got there and attempted to take out a provisional patent I found that the idea was no use, wouldn't work, had a leak in it in fact——"

The Chinaman remained silent.

"Now tell me, Min King, with all your worldly wisdom and experience—for I'm sure you've lived in strange guises many centuries on this earth—tell an ignorant and tactless once-born fool like me what he had best do. If he says the idea is no good he loses all value to the firm. Do you suppose for one moment this fine opening on the Chindwin would have been available for me if I hadn't bulked largely in the minds of my chiefs? Do you see the point?"

One of those pauses which always prefaced speech on the part of Min King followed. At last he spoke.

"It is not, of course, compulsory on you to open your mind on all matters to all comers," he said slowly, "nor even to your employers, so long as the idea is negative, or even," he added significantly, "if it is positive."

There was so much concentrated meaning in the last four words that Carstairs felt as if they were slugs let loose at him which had embedded themselves in his brain. He stirred uneasily. He wanted to stop the conversation then and there. Decidedly enough had been said, yet for the life of him he could not help blurting out the words that had formed themselves in his mind.

"Not to my employers, you say! What about anyone else?"

"Words cannot bind the fruit of the brain," said Min King, after his usual silence. "Neither can one man claim it of another as a right. To each belongs himself to buy or sell in the highest market."

"Hy-o!" ejaculated Carstairs. He had been right then in divining which way the wind blew! But he had no wish whatever to become a "seller" to the Oriental. Even had he been assured of Min King's good faith, for which he wouldn't have offered a brass farthing, he would never have put himself in any such equivocal position. No, if he withheld it from the firm, he was not going to trust anyone else with it. Nor was he going to make any admissions which might whittle away that little palisade of safety he had erected with such care, and, as he flattered himself, with such subtlety. He would have been greatly interested in knowing what price the Chinaman would have offered, and what safeguards he would have suggested, but curiosity had to be stifled, so he remarked casually, "Well, I'm going to turn in, goodnight," and abruptly retired to his own small tent.

It was a very short night, for before the grey dawn

Moung Ka crept into the tent where his master lay, and Carstairs was awakened by his earnest voice saying, "Thakin, thakin, thakin," many times repeated.

"Hang you, what is it?" his master asked at last.

"Beeg bull tsaing."

Carstairs was sitting up in an instant. "What? Where? Near?" he asked all in a breath.

"'Normous bull, master—wornly tracks—master coming quick."

It did not take long to tumble into some clothes, pull on tracking boots with rubber soles, select the outfit and rifle, and be ready. Carstairs had been very careful in choosing exactly what he should most need for such sport before coming north. He had not yet had much chance of shikar, but he had the love of it warmly in his blood.

By the light of a candle in his tent he scrawled an explanation to Min King, with fingers that trembled with cold and excitement; he asked his companion to go on without him, saying that he would follow and catch him up at the site destined for the new estate, even if he did not overtake the party sooner. Then he was out in the open swallowing the scalding tea the boy had ready. The Chin tracker, it appeared, had received his information from a kindred spirit, who had lighted on them from the nearest jungle village, and the two were impatiently awaiting the coming of the European. Already the light was showing in diamond patches between the heavy tree tops where the hillside broke away, though the mist hung wreathed in the valley below. Even here it was fairly thick,

and every leaf and frond was dripping. The mosses and lichens hanging from the trees were like saturated sponges, and to touch inadvertently one of the large pear-shaped leaves of the ficus was to invite a shower-bath.

When Carstairs at last arrived at the place where the spoor began, he found the size of it had not been exaggerated; the marks were so large as to be undoubtedly those of a very fine bull tsaing, even if they were not those of a young bison. Mark Carstairs' heart sang in exultation. Ever since he had known he was coming to the neighbourhood it had been his dream to bag one of these magnificent animals, and his enjoyment was not lessened by knowing that Diana would share in it did she hear. Tha Dun, the tracker, refused steadily to acknowledge the possibility of the bison, but he was eager enough over the tsaing. He was a fine upstanding man, with a terrible scar on the back of his body, which showed he must at one time have been in the position of hunted instead of hunter; but Carstairs thought no worse of him for that, knowing the habits of the wild, and how the animals of both species will turn off at right angles to the trail, and stand motionless to catch the unwary hunter with a lightning-like charge.

The ground was fairly moist, and where the bull had crossed the open patches the spoor was clearly seen, but where he had passed over the thick carpet of rubber-like fallen leaves, it was, to the European eye, indefinable. The sun rose in a clear sky, the jungle fowl were calling from all points of the compass, flights of green pigeon arose from the feeding grounds,

and at last, feeling the heat, with the constant uphill climbing telling on him, Carstairs called a halt for refreshment.

Almost immediately after the march had been resumed the tracker stopped and remained motionless. The man carrying Carstairs' rifle crept up from behind and put it into his waiting hand. Carstairs waved to him and the rest to remain where they were, and himself step by step drew up to Tha Dun until he was level with him. The man without raising his hand indicated a thick patch of bamboo. Marvellously skilled in the forest lore he made the sign quite perceptibly, but with the minimum of movement. Carstairs could as yet see nothing, but his heart began to thrill in expectation. He heard nothing either, but someone of the party left behind must have made a false step, and betrayed the neighbourhood of an enemy, for with a wild plunge a massive beast burst through the thicket on the opposite side to that where they were standing, and they could hear him going away downhill as fast as he could move. Useless to fire when not even his tail could be seen! The two disappointed sportsmen made for the further side of the clump, and followed hard; for a while they heard their quarry thundering ahead, and then came a dead silence. Tha Dun immediately resumed his caution, and again, step by step, began the old wary tracking game, but long before they were within range they heard the tsaing spring off again at a break-neck speed; he had dashed this time into a veritable labyrinth of bamboos, a brake, where the waving canes, interlaced overhead so as to make long

tunnels, grew sometimes so low it seemed impossible that any beast of the size indicated by the spoor could have traversed them, but he slipped through somehow, and they never even saw him. After a most weary and disappointing day they were forced to return to the followers where they had been left. They reached the previous night's camp just before darkness fell. Most dreary it looked with the dead ashes of the wood-fires, and the sticky opened tins and various peelings strewn about. The Burmese personal servants were unfeignedly glad to see the thakin again, and the story lost nothing in the telling round the camp fires that night.

Whether it was owing to the long disappointing day without even the chance of a shot, or to the atmosphere of depression brooding over the camp, Carstairs was seized with a terrible fit of low spirits that evening. So long as he had been aflame with the sportsman's passion he had forgotten all about his conversation with Min King, now he recalled it with ominous insistency. Who was this Chinaman? What was his connection with the firm? He remembered Fyfe having once said, "Marjoram is the only man I have ever known who can make Min King move in a matter which is not directly for his own interest."

Not much comfort in that!

If indeed it was so, why did not Min King himself give the firm the backing they needed, instead of pursuing such small game in the wilderness?

It seemed to Carstairs, sitting smoking by himself after dinner, that something was urging him to give up this expedition and return to the MF. Estate, some-

thing which insistently and pressingly warned him; he seemed once to hear quite clearly in his ear a small voice saying, "Go back," so that he actually turned uneasily and looked around. He argued with himself his nerves must be overstrained. It was absurd to suppose Min King could do him any harm. In any case it was quite obvious, as he had more than once reflected with some comfort, that neither he nor the firm could wish any harm to come to him personally. It was to their interest to keep that brain of his, that held the secret, in being, but he realised with equal clearness that once the secret had escaped him, then certainly his life would not be worth the while of any insurance company to take up.

To go back was not to be thought of, any danger there might be ahead made him more dogged in going on, especially since he had heard that there was a chance of seeing Diana on the Yawtha. That might be, of course, a polite fiction on the part of Min King, designed to draw him forward to the Yawtha, but the mere chance of its being true had been sufficient to decide Carstairs to go. No more hesitation after that! He began to wonder exactly whereabouts she was. The Yawtha was not nearly so large a stream as the Myittha into which it flowed, still it was navigable for launches a good distance up. If by any manner of means he could find the party, he meant to give himself the joy of two days big-game shooting in the wild with Diana. His heart leaped at the glorious thought, and all the depression was dissipated. He even forgot his bitter disappointment of the morning, and smiled a little thinking that most cer-

tainly she would like it too! He did not flatter himself that he held any very special place in her thoughts, but she did like to have him about. As he put it to himself, he didn't bother her. He asked nothing, and was there if she needed him. In this more cheerful frame of mind he went to bed and slept soundly.

It was in the afternoon of the next day that Carstairs finally lighted upon the section of the party under Min King, who had already reached the goal, and were on the patch of level, or more or less level, land, which the Chinaman designed taking up. As he came down from the hills toward them Carstairs could make out that the greater part of the coolies with their baggage had gone on—to Alonzat probably, which was on the other side of the river about three miles off. But in place of them the Chinaman had been joined by some men from the village, amid which, to an experienced eye, the head-man was clearly visible.

He was a truculent looking individual, who had lost one eye, which gave him a villainous appearance, but his demeanour was quite friendly. He treated Min King with marked deference, deferring to him humbly, and listening to all he said with attention. Min King spoke to him through an interpreter of his own, an individual who only now appeared, an intelligent looking, but rather small and wizened man, who carried in his hand an instrument with a sort of bamboo box at one end, over which snake-skin was stretched. From this two strings passed on to a handle, and were pegged down, while a bow, with its strings interlaced, crossed them. Carstairs knew it

for a Chinese fiddle or rebeck. He had heard no note of it on the journey, and found himself speculating on where its owner had sprung from. It was not, however, the kind of thing he cared to ask Min King.

They discussed this way and that the advantages of the proposed site, and Carstairs did his best to satisfy his chief's wishes by telling Min King very fully all the points he could remember about it. He was tired, and would have greatly liked to go on to the village at once to try to discover where the Forbes' launch might be, but he felt that it really was incumbent on him to do so far as he could what Marjoram had asked, therefore he hung about for several hours until darkness began to fall, and the Chinaman, who had never descended from his open chair, intimated that he was satisfied for the present. He had evidently been to the village on his arrival the day before, and had spent the night there, as he spoke of having found quarters.

When he seemed finally satisfied he gave the order to return to Alonzat, and they all moved thitherward together. As they came within sight of the river the head-man gave out several loud hails, and some thatched boats set off at once from the further shore to bring the party across.

Alonzat was built on a sheer cliff rising up steeply from the far side of the water. The only houses visible from the river crowned the crest of the cliff, and were not easy to pick out amid the foliage. Anyone passing along this, the eastern shore, might very well have failed to notice that there was a village there at all.

But when they had landed and turned the edge of the cliff, and begun to climb upwards along the landward slope which was not very steep, a large community revealed itself; there were many clustering huts roofed with dhunny thatch, embedded in plantain, jack-fruit, and mango trees, and a sound and well-constructed stockade ran around the foot of the hill. Certainly a well defended and impregnable place having regard to the warfare that might be expected here. Up to this time Carstairs had hardly spoken to the head-man, who had annoyed him by his obvious disregard of himself in contrast with his eager servility to Min King; now, however, as he found himself abreast of the man in climbing the last slopes to the houses, he could not refrain from asking in Burmese whether he knew of the lady's shikari party.

The head-man paused, swung his arm toward the river, and replied at once, "two, three, four hour up the river, the lady is camped there."

Then it was no mere bait to entrap him, no child's talk invented to fit the moment, but she was really, actually there, within two or three hours' journey up-stream! She could not get out again, in fact, without actually coming past! Mark knew suddenly that it was because it meant so much to him, he had not dared to build upon it, until he knew for certain.

CHAPTER VII

THE WORLD OF THE WILD

RONALD was gloriously happy. He was living in a world made manifest. Until now he had been as observant as most boys, alertly noticing all the material objects presented to him, but interested chiefly in their outward aspect. Now, under his mother's hints, every flat leaf, every trunk, every turn of the stream revealed wonders that made him catch his breath. The voyage out in the *Mesopotamia* had been happy enough, but nothing in comparison with the voyage up the Irrawaddy in their own flat-bottomed launch, with the long slender Burmese boat towed behind. As it dipped and sheered and curtseyed in their wake, it had been like a thing alive, and its high carved prow and thatched cabin formed a beautiful background for the medley of servants, Burmans and Chinamen.

The passage up the Irrawaddy, between high bluffs rolling upward like the crests of waves, crowned by the rich growth of dark glossy-leaved vegetation, had revealed new delights at every turn. At the stopping places were gay little bathing-parties of what Ronald called "darling kids"; happy natural unspoiled children, stark naked but for silver bangles and odd blue beads; they suggested a new sort of frog, with

their rice-inflated tummies and small legs, especially when they took to the water in preference to walking on the dusty sand of the shore. The small, strong-limbed women among them, both ugly and attractive, with their snub noses and wide-apart eyes, had been friendly and courteous, keeping their lively curiosity within the bounds of politeness.

When the launch had entered the Chindwin then began the real World of the Wild so often promised, and Ronald lived as he had never lived before. He had inherited to the full his mother's craving for the unsullied places of the earth, and for the first two days he was very silent, absorbing new and delicious sensations at every pore. She, well understanding, had left him alone, only meeting his eyes now and again with that tender pleased smile she reserved for him alone. At last his feelings burst forth in the exclamation: "To think, to think, there must be hundreds of people in England, well able to afford it, who never come here!"

They had stayed a couple of days in the dry zone, and gone on shore in the flat country to get a peep at thamin, though Diana said beforehand that unless they were prepared for the indignity of stalking and shooting from a village cart they would never get a chance at them. She did not wish the boy to have his first big-game experiences in this humiliating fashion, so they had wandered on foot across the more or less open country, with its tall khaki-coloured grass, and great lumps of thorn, for all the world resembling a bit of the New Forest in everything except colouring.

They had been rewarded by seeing a herd of the watchful beasts feeding far out of range. Then they had passed on.

There had been some exciting work over rocks and rapids as they turned into the narrower river, and on almost the first day of real jungle work, Ronald had bagged his first head—that of a barking deer. He had shot recklessly, as the pretty little beast bolted on discovering them, its chestnut coat glinting in the early morning radiance, and its little scut waving like a flag of truce as it leapt across a glade. And with the luck of a tyro he had brought it down stone dead. In some ways this was not unlike rabbit shooting, which he had practised, only far, far grander.

Ronald had stood beside his trophy, smoothing its soft coat in an ecstasy of wonder; he had handled its small neat curving horns and snub nose while Diana watched him. "Quite a nice head; we'll have that mounted," she said, with that pleased laugh of hers that rang so genuinely. "You'll get something bigger presently, but you'll never feel quite like that again."

Then she had carefully explained to him the points to be marked. The horns were five inches, quite good measure for one of this species, though in an old bull they sometimes ran to six. The hooks curved inward so that the head could be hung by them. See how they sprang out of a kind of thick sheath! That peculiar frown on the animal's brow did not indicate a captious disposition, but was due to a wrinkle in the skin found in all of his kind. She put down Ronald's hand to feel the tiny tush in the jaw, telling him it was

an odd mark to discover there, more what might be expected in anything which called itself a hog-deer.

Then they had left that spot of blessed memory and steamed first into the Myittha, turning at a right angle to the Chindwin, and then from there into the Yawtha, parallel to the Chindwin.

It was here they first saw real variety of jungle scenery, and the days were so full of change that it was difficult to absorb the shifting scenes. The current continually varied, from numerous short rapids to shimmering stretches of comparatively shallow water so clear and still they could see the silvery fish, streaked with blue, "exactly like some national flag," as described by Ronald. The serang of the launch, who knew his job, was always on the alert. Huge black and blue butterflies, and dragon-flies reddish in colour, not blue as in England, skimmed the water, and from stone to stone unheeding them skipped and chittered small familiar wagtails. Comparatively common were enormous kingfishers clad in the iridescent blue armour of their kind, but boasting in addition breast-plates of terra-cotta. Once, far up on a dead branch, himself exactly the whitey-drab and dark brown of his perch, hung a motionless fish-eagle.

Sometimes the banks were fifty feet above the boat, crowned by a sort of tree-fern which hung over perilously, gripping the loose soil with its roots, and here and there, like a great pillar of marble, high, high into the sky, far above the deep-green sea of vegetation gathering like weeds at its feet, towered the ivory stem of a gigantic "gurjan."

Deep ravines opened off on this side and that with

a curious lure in their inky depths over which the heavy foliage met and shut out daylight, and at other times little innocent streams babbled into the Yawtha mildly over their pebbles, only betraying their capacity for ferocity in the wet season by the huge boulders that always lay about their mouths.

And thus they came to Alonzat on its cliff. It was useful to be near a village where local trackers might be found and rice and eggs obtained. Yet it was not well to be too near, or the curiosity of the inhabitants as to this new sort of mistress and "little master" might become inconveniently obtrusive. These people were much less sophisticated than the Burmans further down, and not nearly so well mannered.

So the tents had been unfolded and pitched on a strip of silvery sand on the further bank of the river from Alonzat, and well above it. There were two tents, a large one which served for shelter during the day if needed—in this Diana slept at nights—and a small one, a mere flap along a ridge pole, close beside, into which Ronald crept to sleep. She had a swing cot on a bamboo framework, covered by a thick resai, the stuffed cotton blanket of the East, a cross between a thin mattress and an eiderdown quilt. Ronald had two of them doubled up under him, and slept as only boys of his age can sleep. It all looked very cosy, and was a great improvement on the hard benches in the tiny cabin which they had so far occupied at nights.

They had had an excellent dinner, skinny chicken curry and goat steak, and strange native vegetables, including brinjals, followed by tinned apricots, and

now Ronald was lying sound asleep on his mother's cot until she wanted it herself. He had on his flannel pyjamas and great-coat, and was well rolled up, for the nights were chilly in comparison with the strong sun of the daytime. The mosquitoes had ceased from troubling, but the sandflies had been almost unendurable, and no curtains, however tiny of mesh, kept them out.

"Aren't we fools to stay on sand when the little beggars make themselves such a nuisance?" Ronald had asked wearily.

"Nothing to do with sand," Diana assured him. "They are every bit as bad in the thickest wood. Perhaps they're called sandflies because they are no bigger than grains of sand."

Now that he had fallen asleep almost immediately after dinner, she strolled alone up and down by the rushing black water. She was in her beautiful fur coat, and the dark collar rising high above her ears made her face and fair head seem very small and white. There was an imperfect moon somewhere growing toward the full, but down here in the low level it could not be seen, though its thin mysterious light proclaimed its presence.

The foliage on the banks had none of the feathery look of some European trees, for each of the thick leaves formed an opaque black blot through which no light could penetrate. The combined mass rising against the clear starry sky opposite was as something menacing, terrific, uprearing itself to fall in a deluge of woe on the temerarious mortals who had dared to thrust themselves into this sanctuary.

The air was shrill with the pipes of many insects, and the incessant squawk of frogs. Here and there the treacly masses of the water, combed by the rocks into hurrying foam, babbled wearisomely. But these sounds all blended into one whole, and the more distinctive noises, such as that of an anvil-bird, which had made himself a nuisance most of the afternoon, had now ceased from troubling, and the peevish whine of the flying foxes had died away. The black depths behind were peopled by mighty creatures, some perhaps of a girth and size never yet visioned by man, coming down from their thickets secure in the awful night. Once there was a great " whoop " from some unknown living thing not so very far away, and a vast bellowing cry, then a scutter as of smaller things startled into terror, and all was again silent except for that chorus of the underworld hardly heard by the ears attuned to it.

There might be tigers prowling in the nullahs and quins which scored the forest depths, even now they were probably playing in delicious wantonness, yet, when most absorbed, still with whiskered nostrils ready for the faintest whiff of an intruder in their playground. Panthers there would be certainly, cruellest of beasts——

Diana started from head to heel, then stood stock still, for there came vibrating to her ears the snap of a twig in the thick bit of jungle to which she had carelessly drawn near at the end of her promenade. It was raised a little on a bluff of rock that partly overhung the sand pit. She stood hesitating, because to turn tail might tempt some marauder to spring,

but what marauder? Even on a night of such velvety blackness in the undergrowth what wild thing could possibly be so clumsy as to crack a twig?

A native perhaps from the village. She had been careful to plant the camp on the opposite shore from Alonzat in order to secure seclusion, but there were ways of getting across. The sound of bushes thrust aside confirmed this idea, and her heart beat more evenly; after all, her men, sleeping in the boat, were not a hundred yards away!

A figure burst through the tangle on the summit of the bluff, and sprang lightly down beside her. The moonlight, dim as it was, showed sufficient of his outline and movements to identify him.

Diana said "You!" in one glad moment; the one word he would rather have heard from her than any other. It sent a wave of heat all over Carstairs, so that he stammered as he spoke, losing for once his usual temperate self-possession. He laughed a little glad laugh which matched the gladness in her tone.

"Why not! I came to Alonzat to-day and heard you were some miles up."

"Well, we *are* glad to see you, Ron and I. This *is* nice. Now you'll be able to tell us all sorts of things we want to know." Seldom had he seen her so warmly kind, so animated in manner.

They stood for a moment with ears open for the music of the great jungle organ.

"Wherein all the beasts of the forest do move," quoted Carstairs.

"A running that could not be seen of skipping

beasts or a roaring voice of most savage wild beasts," she capped.

"Where's that from?"

"Same as yours, only uncanonical."

"You mean the Apocrypha?"

"You *do* like crossing the t's and dotting the i's, don't you?" she chaffed.

As they turned and walked back she warned him. "Ron is asleep, I believe; don't make a noise. He slept hours this afternoon, but he needs all he can get with our early morning starts. S'sh!"

Together they stood by the sleeping boy at the tent door.

"See," said Diana, "you take his head and I'll take his feet, and we'll lift him right into his own tent. A boy sleeps so sound, he'll never wake."

"Leave him to me," said Carstairs, and fell on one knee to remove the lad's canvas shoes. The light from a candle covered by a glass globe, smeared by infatuated insects, fell on them both, and Diana stood looking down with a peculiar expression in her eyes. The two, the fair head and the dark one, were in line from her angle of sight. Without looking up Mark felt the warmth of that rare glance, and prolonged the moment during which he was inside, comforted, one with this mother and son. But just as he rose to pick up his charge his eyes meeting hers broke the current between them and she hurriedly looked away.

He deposited Ronald with a neatness and skill that left nothing to be desired.

"That will do nicely, thank you," said Diana, but the tone was not quite so detached as usual. Diana,

even at her kindest, had often a way of making people feel she dwelt in some watertight compartment to which most of the world had no admittance. She returned to her ordinary manner again as they sat down on the two canvas chairs, outside the entrance, in the rectangular patch of light made by the candle.

"What will you have, whisky and soda or coffee? Then I want to hear all about it."

"Coffee, please, if your man can make it."

"Jungle manners," Diana remarked promptly. "You'll have to wait and see for saying that."

She clapped her hands, and the ghostly figure of Fah Sien materialised, as she gave the order.

"There, it's quite early—yes—do smoke. No, I don't—never have——"

"That's odd," he said as he lit his pipe. "Anyone who has been about as much as you would have found it necessary, I should have thought."

"How do you know I've been about so much?" she asked provocatively.

Never had she been so approachable; he felt he could say almost anything without that constant expectation of coming up against the buffer, which had always haunted him, when he attempted anything personal with her.

"There have been certain references," he began—"to China, for instance?"

"That's interesting. How do you know I've been in China?"

"The opium dens of Shanghai——"

"Do you always remember every little thing everyone says?" she demanded.

"By no means," he answered, with all the emphasis he could put into it.

Fah Sien stood before them with the coffee, which he arranged on a small table.

"How long have I known you, Fah Sien?" Diana asked; "tell the Thakin."

"Must be very many years," answered the Chinaman. She dismissed him with a wave of the head. "There you see! Sugar? Yes? There's no milk—we can't get it, and I am not going to open another tin of condensed until the morning."

He took the coffee, and before he drank it discerned by the fragrance that it was excellent.

"Any development?" Diana asked presently.

So he told her slowly and in his own way the various incidents that had happened, and the phases of thought in connection with them that had come to him, since he parted from her. All the while the black treacly water hurried past the spit to the unknown, the subdued murmur of an impetuous world made itself felt, above and around, and the menace of the mighty wall of blackness opposite charged them both with a curious thrill, as if they were children who had somehow walked through a looking-glass, or down a rabbit-hole into fairyland.

"After all, you know," said Diana, at length, as she refilled his cup, "you are wrong. Having signed that paper, you ought to give them your invention."

"I told you before, the actual wording of the assignment is to give to the firm any invention or idea I may patent while in their employment, but I grant that's a quibble. Anyhow, I don't mean to give it to them."

"Neither should I," said Diana, with immense decision.

"Oh," he exclaimed, greatly relieved. "I'm glad you feel like that."

"So you think Min King is in the plot? Do you know what I think?"

"I'd like to know."

"The whole thing is a great deal in your own head; they don't probably attach nearly the importance to your wonderful invention that you imagine."

"I'd be glad to believe you're right. But it *is* rather wonderful, you know."

"I *said* 'wonderful.'"

"Yes, but in mockery! Look here, it goes like this——" He reached out for a bit of stick and began tracing on the sand.

"Oh, don't tell me," said Diana. "I hardly know one end of a machine from the other, except a gun, if you call that a machine. Still, of course," she went on, bending over him, "that is really nice—so it goes like that? And this line comes down here?" drawing it with the fine toe of her little skin slipper. "Oh, doesn't it? Do make it, please; it's all lop-sided without. I'm quite sure a machine that looked lop-sided could never work." She took the stick from his hand and began adding lines until she made a grotesque resemblance to a human face. They both laughed, then sat up suddenly, for Fah Sien was bending over them from behind to take the tray with the cups. Diana spoke sharply to him. "You know I have told you never to come unless I call," she said, so sternly that Carstairs could hardly have believed it

possible. This was the Diana who shot big game and managed natives; he had not met her before. The Chinaman drew back, looking the picture of meek submission, his hands folded in his sleeves, until she finished with a sharp, "You may go, but wait within call in case I need you again."

"Now I know the——" he had nearly said "Diana," so exactly did that name fit her image in his mind, but changed it to "the woman who can go all over the world shooting."

"But I haven't been all over the world," she protested, still slightly ruffled. "Only British Columbia and parts of Manchuria." Then, after a pause, "That's why I have made a great effort to bring Ronald out here for a start, though most people think I'm perfectly mad to break into his school days. He may miss a little book-learning, but think what he will learn instead, think what a glorious good time he may have if he only begins young—I missed so much."

"You seem to have had a pretty glorious time, anyway, much more so than most women."

"Do you think so?" There was a sudden note of deep significance in her tone as if he had struck through the curtain this time. "How little people know! I should say few women have suffered as bitterly as I have done."

He longed to hear but judged silence best.

"When I think of it——" she went on. Then suddenly dived into her tent. He couldn't conceive what for, and why the longed for confidence was interrupted at the moment of fruition. But she was back, quick-footed, in an instant, and in her hands

was some dark-coloured knitting. "I can't talk properly unless I am working," she explained. "I suppose it takes the place of smoking. This is a wool jacket for Ron."

"Well, you are——" he exclaimed. Then suddenly memory brought back to him the picture of her as he had seen her frequently on board the ship with waves of billowy white work, fashioning endless little dainty tucks and putting in insertion with stitches that could hardly be seen. The picture of that woman had faded away as he had grown to associate her with shooting, now the two sprang up side by side and refused to coalesce.

But she was laughing again in her old unruffled way. "Why not!" she asked, "I can't help it—I'm made like that, in streaks. Luckily Ron has inherited the love of solitude and nature."

A long pause.

"When I think of him! Yet I was not much older than he when I had—a hell of a time——"

"You were married young then?"

He could not doubt now that Ronald was actually her own son; Mrs. Fyfe's story had long since gone to smoke so far as he was concerned.

"Yes. Barely seventeen. I *would* do it in spite of all my people could say, so they cut me off, and I have never seen them again."

She paused after this astonishing revelation.

"But why?" he asked. "Was he—such a—so impossible?"

"No; but I was an only child, and my father was—is—an autocrat. He didn't like Francis Forbes, and

he was quite right. I ran away with him and got married, and we went to British Columbia. For two years I was fairly happy, we had enough money, that is to say, he had, and he was devoted to me. He meant well, and was very handsome, but—like most men—he was very weak——"

He let that pass, but reserved his right to challenge later.

"Then——" her manner became strangely impressive—she hesitated, broke off a bit of wool—looked at him engagingly and got it out—"we met your Mr. Marjoram."

He felt as if the shock it gave him had been sufficient to lift him out of his seat, though outwardly he made no movement.

"So you did know him before; I thought so," he said, in a low tone, trying to piece together what he remembered of the meeting at the pagoda.

"Like Min King," continued Diana thoughtfully, "That One was born many hundreds of years ago. But it's unusual in a European. You generally meet that kind in Orientals. They live on the blood and brains of others."

"Yet you don't think Tom Marjoram is trying to suck mine?" interjected Carstairs suddenly. He hadn't wished to interrupt her, but it came involuntarily.

"He may be, but it would make a very little meal for him, that scrap—he would want you, body and bone, blood and brains and all."

"Perhaps he does!" said Carstairs, in an awestruck voice.

The silence that followed was filled and dilated with a long-drawn note of despairing agony like nothing either of them recognised. It sounded as if it rose from the bed of the river, beat in impotence up the terrific face of the crags opposite, ran along pent in by the oppressive black foliage, and finally escaped on the wind to the home of lost souls. So penetrating, so hopeless was it, yet withal with a weird music in its terrible pathos that it made them both involuntarily clutch each other.

"I don't know any animal that cries like that," exclaimed Mark under his breath.

Diana's hands were at her ears. "In the dim long ago I have once heard something like it, but where or what I know not, perhaps before I was born," she whispered.

A gust of wind cut into the utter stillness that succeeded, and moved the heavy plant life this way and that in a profound disturbance, as great as that among the small animal life which moved in the dead leaves. Then it passed like the waft of an almighty power and all was still again.

"Probably a night bird," Carstairs suggested. "That the puff of wind should follow it was odd. You were saying——"

"I was going to say Tom Marjoram ate up Francis Forbes body and blood and bones," continued Diana, resuming her knitting; "he would have eaten me if he could, but I was too tough."

"Yet you came out here with the risk of getting into his power again?" he queried suddenly, remembering what she had said of a fascination

which might be as potent and irresistible as drug-taking.

She looked at him for a moment intently, but disregarded his question, and went on with the story in her own fashion.

"It began by little and little," she said. "When we first met him I was glad. He was so cheerful, and Francis had fits of melancholy which worried me. Then they played cards together, and I felt him slipping from me. I fought, I fought tooth and nail; I never ceased or wearied. I lay awake at nights thinking out all the littlest, littlest details that might outwit That One, and sometimes they did; then he saw that I was clever too, and he began to play—in earnest. Before that he had done it just on his way through life, snatching up one or another, sometimes a man, sometimes a woman—sucking them dry or smashing them up and leaving them there; but he didn't do it of conscious cruelty, I think, but because of his nature; he is a tiger or a panther, he has no human feelings——"

Carstairs started; it was what he had often felt about Marjoram himself.

"When he saw I knew his nature and was fighting to hold my own, he turned from unconsciousness to consciousness, and he played for love of the game. I sometimes think now if I had never known, never tried to outplay him, but been the usual unseeing woman, after a time he would have dropped Francis and gone his way——"

"Do you wish you had?"

"No, not now."

He was again amazed at this extraordinary woman ; he put in his protest feeling it banal in the last degree. " But you would have kept your husband ? "

" No husband of mine ; I never loved him."

" I thought you said you did," Carstairs muttered.

" I thought I did, at first ; he was good-looking in his way, and his manners were taking. He hated to hurt anyone's feelings," she said contemptuously. " But, child as I was, what did I know of love ? No, I said for that two years I was not unhappy, that was because I am adaptable, and seeing the bed I had made I decided to lie in it as comfortably as possible. Then, too, we had tastes in common ; we went shooting expeditions, and we both enjoyed those."

She paused, then said abruptly :

" It was nearly a year after Marjoram appeared on the scene that Ronnie was born—ah ! "—and for one instant she dropped her face into her hands and a shudder ran through her from head to foot—" to think that I should have used him as a weapon in the fight ! "

Carstairs was profoundly moved. The unnerving spectacle of a woman's soul lying bare before him, quivering in the intensity of its reminiscent pain, stirred him as never in his inner life, carefully guarded from intrusion by his fellow-creatures, had he been stirred before. He felt so strongly that Diana's reserve was as great or greater than his own, and that only the unusual circumstances had sufficed to lift the veil, that he was inexpressibly moved by her revelation. It was deeps calling to deeps.

"Did that hold back your husband?" he asked at last, very gently.

She shook her head. "It made no difference; it was too late. I believe he hated the baby because he saw I found my solace there, and was therefore the more ready to let him go. By that time—the venom of the brute that was poisoning him had permeated him—he who had always been so weakly miserable when he hurt anyone's feelings, who had often lied and prevaricated sooner than cause unpleasantness, was now eager to enjoy the misery he caused; he wanted me to suffer, and wanted to watch it too."

"Why on earth didn't you leave him?"

"How could I without money? No. I got together all the will I had left, and managed to persuade him to come away with me. We went to Japan." A long silence. "*He* followed us there. We went to China. I tried to revive all that was healthy in Francis by taking him shooting expeditions in Manchuria, and for a while he got gradually back to comparative moral sanity. But—he followed us there, and there he finished his work. Now you know how I became acquainted with opium dens in Shanghai."

There was a long silence, and the frogs positively shrieked.

"He died there?" said Carstairs at last.

"He died in one of them," she amended.

"Yet you came to the same country where Marjoram is—again?"—he wanted to say, but he looked at her, and seeing she was very white, with the provoking lines curiously straightened, he refrained, whispering

instead: "You are not afraid of him now?" and there was no need to specify the subject of the pronoun between them.

"I never was afraid of him," said Diana, with a proud lift of her head.

"Why did you come to Burma?" was the nearest he could get.

"Burma is the ideal place for a boy like Ronald, who must not be overdone. Civilised enough, but wild enough; safe, but sufficiently exciting, with plenty of varied sport, but not too frightfully costly. Why should I stop coming to Burma because That One is here? He isn't king of the country." She spoke lightly again.

"I see. Well, if you really want Ron to see some grand sport, there's a chance. I came over partly to tell you to-night. A man in the village there swears there are bison—gaur, you know—not very many miles away. They are very rarely about here in the cold weather; the rains are the best season. But I understand he's a reliable fellow. I'm going after them myself. Will you two come?"

"Oh!" Diana's eyes shone, her knitting had fallen to the ground forgotten. She looked for one moment as if she were going to rush in to wake up Ronnie and tell him. "Bison? It sounds like Canada. Oh, yes; I know. They're not quite like, something about the ribs, isn't it? But is it possible? What must we do?"

"You'd better go on ponies till we get to the tracks so as not to be too tired. I'll bring them from Alonzat. We shall have to make a very early start. I've engaged

this chap for tracker. I must go back to the village for the rest of the night, but we'll be along here by 3 a.m. Will that be too early ? "

"Not a bit. We've slept half the day. What rifles must we take ? "

That question was thoroughly gone into, and in Carstairs' presence Diana summoned the waiting Chinaman, and gave him full directions as to their being called, and as to what must be packed and ready for the morning. Then—an altogether brightened, vivified Diana, the Diana he had so far known—she bade Carstairs a pleased good-bye, and waved to him as he plunged back along the river bank, rifle in hand, ready for emergencies.

The ugly menace threatening him had sunk back again out of sight.

CHAPTER VIII

RONALD

It was bitterly cold and blackly cheerless; even the wood fire the servants had lighted seemed to have no warmth in it. Why was anyone ever such a fool as to get up at this unearthly hour?

In spite of his comparatively early retirement, Ronald was like a log, and needed his mother's emphatic shakes and pulls to make him move. When he comprehended, he nodded, threw one leg outside the mosquito net, and fell fast asleep again.

The arrival of the village contingent livened matters a little, but not much. The lank ponies, dripping from head to tail, from their thrust through the bushes, looked so dejected that they sent the atmosphere down ten degrees. Diana felt she positively loathed Carstairs, who looked as wide-awake and matter-of-fact as usual.

She had to let off her annoyance on somebody.

"Who is that man in a bath towel near the ponies?" she demanded abruptly.

"His Highness the thugyi of the village, in whose house I have been lodging," returned Carstairs evenly. "His people want meat, it appears, and he is sending a contingent with us to fetch it back."

"We're sure to get any amount with the village population swarming around," she exclaimed disgustedly.

"I have limited the number to four besides the tracker; they will only come to the place where we first find tracks, not a step further."

"Are you ever in a bad temper?" Diana asked, warming her fingers on the enamel mug of hot tea she held. "Do you ever feel you want to squeal and pirouette, and go for anyone head-first like an old rhino?"

He came close up to her.

"Is it as bad as that?" he asked sympathetically. "I promise you in an hour's time you'll be feeling quite differently." She wouldn't have been surprised if he had patted her arm.

So they streamed upward, the three Europeans on ponies following the tracker, who, swathed in nondescript coloured cloths over head and shoulders, led the van.

Then came the coolies and body servants, and another pony laden with the necessary provender and weapons, and lastly the Burmo-Chins from the village, intent on picking up anything the thakin managed to slay; their faith in their prowess was so complete, it was as if the meat were already in their mouths. As for themselves, the regulations were very strict about fire-arms, which could only be used by the lucky few who had them, to scare away marauders from the crops, as when a herd of wild elephant was about, so that the larger forms of game which really plenished a man's stomach did not often come their way.

It was all uphill, and the dew made everything very dank. Now and again the ponies slipped and stumbled so that one or another had to dismount, and with one man pulling the pony, and the rider hanging on to its tail, they managed to scramble forward, not without various mud plasters.

All the time it was growing lighter, and when, finally, they attained to a clearer bit of the hillside, they caught a glimpse of the illimitable sea of jungle swelling away from below as level as the ocean. From thence onward it was a day of days. And—not for that reason only—a day which could never be forgotten by at least two of the party.

Beneath that spreading surface lay a world of things that crept, and stalked, and slept, and flew. The larger animals would be seeking where to lie up for the day after browsing all night. Jungle cocks were answering each other's challenges shrilly. Over the long wisp of blue haze that rolled upward from the tree tops the sky was of a crystalline fairness that refused to be plumbed by imagination.

"Now," said Ronald, suddenly looking up, "I feel the sky as sky—plungeable. I've always felt it like a cloth."

While they rested Carstairs explained that anyone might go for days in the jungle and never see a living thing, for though this underworld was inhabited, it needed trained eyes and a certain quality of immobility to get a glimpse of its denizens. Then the monkeys were shy, the little gibbons, and grey old-man langurs often seeing without being seen; it was only in the neighbourhood of the villages they grew

impertinent enough to pay scant attention to the presence of man.

They did not stop long, but hurried on until the tracker indicated they were in the zone where bison might be found. It was about six o'clock then, and the thrilling fairness of a new day was fully upon them, with all the vibrantly electric quality that is never felt but at sunrise in the East. A halt was called; the men prepared breakfast, while the ponies were allowed to feed, but it was all done with loins girt, so to speak, for if they meant to get a bison there was no time for delay.

Diana Forbes and Mark Carstairs were not lovers; he, indeed, was further on the road to such a possible end than she, and yet even he had not so outlined the situation to himself. She was too far from him, not older, for they were much of an age, but on another plane of experience and of-the-worldness. He had never yet dreamed of making any personal claim on her; he was in a state of arrested happiness so complete, so perfect, it filled his being, and left no room for questionings as to the future. He thought nothing of the morrow or the inevitable parting; the keen sportsman's instinct, shared in intense satisfaction with the most original, wonderful interesting being he had ever met, saturated him with contentment.

As for Diana, she found herself studying him sometimes in a little half quizzical, half motherly style. Up to now she had believed herself completely satisfied with Ronald's society. Many people are happy, or so consider themselves, until a further degree of happiness opens out before them. Now she became aware

that there was room in her life for someone more on a level with herself than Ronald, thoughtful darling though he was, and into that chink this dark-eyed, self-contained, evenly-balanced man fitted very well. She had liked him from the beginning, recognising in him that capacity for suffering above the average of humankind which was also in herself. She knew that he could suffer and be silent about it longer than most men. She could not phrase it better than that she felt "safe" with him; he would not repeat what she said, or be weakly swayed from his considered opinions. She could not imagine him showing panicky fear. Without her knowing it, he had during the voyage been drifting into that unique position "the exception" among men. But it had not been until last night that any strain of tenderness had been mingled with her feeling for him. That had suddenly caught alight as he kneeled by the sleeping Ronald, and for an instant it was as if a warm flame of comfort had swathed her round. Even now it was with a touch of the mother-love that she looked at him, but her mother-love had more of the comrade in it than most women's, and was not called forth by any sort of helplessness.

The whole of the mixed following was left at the camp with emphatic orders to stay there, when at last the tracker, who had been casting around, came back with the excellent news he had found promising spoor.

"It seems to be a young bull," said Carstairs, after talking to him in Burmese. "Good enough for a beginning. We may have to follow far. Tell your

men to wait here until—well, give them a good overplus—say four o'clock, and if we're not here by then to go back to camp, as we shall have made our way from some nearer point. One village man is to follow us, far enough behind to come back and fetch up the rest if necessary. The ponies stay with them, of course."

Ronald had no gun. It wasn't to be expected anything he could handle would account for the lordly game they were after. Diana carried a ·400 high-velocity rifle which she swore by, and which was not too heavy for her to carry, and Carstairs had a D.B. 10-bore Paradox rifle, much heavier. Before they started, after which silence would be imperative, he gave her his experience.

"Of course you'll take the shot," he said. "You must follow the tracker up close; I usually go in front if the spoor's clear; he won't let you get wrong. If you get a sight of the beast, or find out where he is before he sees you, remember the faintest movement or false step will set him off, but if you're still as a rock he may look at you and yet not fear you. It's lucky it's a single bull; I wouldn't have cared to take you into a herd, the stampede is very dangerous if there's more than one hunter. I'll follow your every movement, and if I see you're on to it will take cover with Ronald somewhere, and get a chance of having a shot if you fail. If you only get a frontal shot, aim below his eye for the brain. Remember, above all, this. He won't fall to your first bullet, even if you rake him from stem to stern, so don't be disheartened, follow him up, and very shortly he will stop; then

you stop too and stalk again, but run as hard as you like whilst he rushes ; he won't hear you."

" At any rate," said Diana demurely, " if I don't get any sport at all I shan't go home empty-headed——"

She stopped, for the tracker was pointing to a spoor of marks on dried mud that made her thrill. Ronald had to be shown, of course, and the difference by which the mark was known to be that of a bull and not of a cow was explained to him. Then they went off ; Diana first after the tracker, who had now discarded his swathes and stood out a finely made figure of a man, taller than the average down-country Burman and darker, his bare brown shoulders gleaming in the sun, his goung-baung and lyungi a mottled colour, once red, that harmonised well with the tints around. As she followed, Diana wondered if he had consciously striven for this result, or if it were accidental. However attained, it was uncommonly good, for when he stopped she could hardly see him.

For an hour they went thus. Even at this altitude and in the cold weather it was too warm for comfort, and perspiration poured down all the party. They had to bend and double amid avenues and tunnels of jungle growth, through which it could hardly be believed so large an animal as a bison would have passed. The marks were mostly invisible to Diana, though here and there she lit on one. It didn't seem particularly new, and she began to wonder if the tracker were mistaken and the marks days old, when suddenly he stopped and promptly became invisible. It required quite a lot of courage to obey that motionless summons and come up with him, terrified all the

time of doing something so egregiously foolish that some monstrous beast, bigger and blacker than any bison ever shot, would crash out and disappear, when she must have wept not only for her own small personal pride but for her sex. Carstairs had never said so, but the sex antagonism was strong between them, and she was sure he thought a woman could never shoot a bison, hence she was on her mettle.

At last, however, restraining her desire to hasten, she came cautiously up to the silent Chin.

They were under the crest of a hill, covered with a variety of thick stuff intersected by tracks and even small open spaces, and roofed by the high spaciousness of the long trees supporting " the roof of the world " without a branch below. To her amazement, as she crawled up to the man, Diana heard, actually heard, some big animal feeding not far off, smashing bushes and pushing its way about, and making from time to time an odd grunting noise, evidently quite unconscious of danger. Her heart throbbed so much she nearly choked. She forgot Carstairs, even Ronald, and all her little pride went to smithereens. Her heart was enlarged for the game and the game alone.

Following the almost imperceptible motion of the tracker she moved forward by herself. In an instant the forest swallowed her up, and all by herself, a tiny trembling thing, she crept forward, trusting to the ear alone and watching every time she set her foot to the ground. It might have been hours, it might have been minutes, when, peering through the blinding dusk of the thick growths, she became aware of a black patch which was not mere space or distance

between some hanging lianas and a bamboo clump. At the same instant she was aware that all movement had ceased, and the beast was as still as herself. Whether he had winded her she could not tell. She dare not drop on one knee to steady her shot, and she dare not shoot, for she had not the remotest notion what part of his body the irregularly framed patch enclosed. Her arm ached with holding the rifle ready, and she was just beginning to think she must sink down, when he moved suddenly and thrust his great head into the opening, looking straight at her not twenty yards off. She could even see his ash-smeared forehead and light eye, and also a fine pair of curled, thick, slightly curved forward horns. He held his head high, with the nose poked out, and, remembering Carstairs' words, she aimed a little below the eye and fired. It seemed all to happen in one second, the huge head thrust forward, the instantaneous thought, the shot, and a wild snort and tremendous crash as the animal went off downhill like a motor-omnibus. She tore after him, scurrying in and out among the tracks until right end on in his smashing wake. Then he pulled up suddenly, all was still; it was exactly as Carstairs had said! Once again she began peering and peeping and creeping, but she could see nothing. Then there was another wild charge, followed almost instantly by a crash and a smothered "hooray" from Ronald, somewhere quite near.

Diana dropped concealment and ran toward the voice, just as Ronald and Carstairs also broke cover and ran onward. All three, joined by the tracker, made for a heavy patch of bush ahead. Carstairs

raised his hand for caution. "I think he is down," he said, "but wait." He crept in, while Ronald turned a shining face of eagerness to his mother. Then came a glad summons, and they leapt forward to find Carstairs standing by the fallen bull, which had pitched forward on its knees dead as it fell.

"Well done!" he said, looking at her with the genuine sportsman's admiration. "You've struck him in the one spot where a bullet like yours is vital—the brain. Anywhere else he might have gone for miles, and you would have lost him."

"But he can't have run all that way with a bullet in his brain," objected Diana, purring with pride and delight.

"Can't he? You don't know what a bison can do. It may have been just at the base or the side of the brain."

The bison looked extraordinarily massive as he lay there a great elephant-coloured lump of flesh. His head seemed to be quite half of him, an effect partly due to the falling away of his hind quarters. The horns were fine enough, twenty-seven inches in length and deeply corrugated. The village man had now come up and was away like the wind to fetch his fellows.

Carstairs gave directions to the tracker about the horns, and they returned, rich in joy, to the well-earned late breakfast in the jungle camp. After it they lazed a little, Diana still purring.

"No big game will be feeding later than this," said Carstairs, "but we may pick up something small, and Ronald can get a shot at jungle fowl."

Ronald had wandered down to the hill-stream where the servants were washing up, and Diana, forgetting for a moment her grand triumph, spoke quickly.

"I had better tell you something more just to finish up all that I told you last night," she said, lying comfortably on a mat covering a heap of leaves. "How do you suppose Tom Marjoram got enough money to start business in Burma?"

"I never thought of it. I suppose he had it."

"No, he had not, not anything; but That One knows very well how to pick up things. Francis found a mine, or a good place for a mine, up in the Dawson City country. He staked out a claim, but it brought in nothing. He gave it to Marjoram—gave it, mark you—yes, he did, for he told me so himself, poor fool! We went over to China—I told you Marjoram followed, but by that time he was a rich man, comparatively, for he had sold that claim, which happened to be something quite out of the ordinary, to a syndicate. He told us so frankly."

"But——"

"But such was the hold he had over Francis, Francis didn't mind, he seemed rather pleased. Now you can judge how he held him in the grip of his hand, body and soul."

She had rolled over and was plucking rather viciously at the grass.

"How long ago was that?"

"Ronald was about a year old. It must have been fourteen or fifteen years ago."

"He did come to Burma then."

"I know. He told me so. Said he had always had

a fancy for trading in Burma. What I can't understand is why he has stuck to it."

"It suits him. He is constantly off; he's been in Siam, Java, Malay Straits, and elsewhere since I've known him."

There was one of those long silences that often fell between them, then Carstairs asked abruptly:

"Are you—was your husband, I mean—one of the Forbes of Loch Eyre, as Mrs. Fyfe said?"

"Oh, you heard that story, did you? What did you think of it?" Intense amusement was shining all over her alluring face as she looked up at him.

He couldn't answer. He gazed down at her, noting her frank eyes with something indescribably piquant in their setting; the snub nose, no it wasn't in the least snub, quite straight—but somehow it ended up provokingly—what he wanted to say was, "I think you're the most attractive and original woman I ever met in all the world," but, of course, that was out of the question, so he knocked out his pipe against his boot and remarked:

"I've been watching out for your murdering Ronnie all the time. That's what I'm here for."

"She only mistook me," explained Diana, twinkling the more so that he could not but let his eyes rest on hers again, "for my step-mother-in-law."

"I say—how much?" he asked.

"Francis Forbes was the eldest son of old Mr. Forbes of Loch Eyre. His father didn't quarrel with him for marrying me. He didn't mind at all. He'd have been glad if I could have made anything of him. He had no use for Francis. That's why we went

abroad. Then old Mr. Forbes married again, and had another son about the same time as Ronald was born——"

"Then that's the boy the story is about?"

"Probably. When we returned home we saw quite a good deal of old Mr. Forbes; he was very kind to me, and he liked Ronnie."

"Is it true that the other Mrs. Forbes was left dependent on her son?"

"Yes. She is a terrible flirt, and he may have thought such a proviso might keep her in order."

They talked a little more, but the conversation grew desultory, and after a while it was apparent that Diana could hardly keep awake.

"Now," suggested Carstairs, "suppose you stay here and have a rest, and Ronald and I will go round and see what we can pick up in a small way."

"I'm not going to stir for an hour or so yet," said Diana, "you please yourselves."

It was not after all until about four in the afternoon they finally started to go home. Ronald and Carstairs had by that time shot odds and ends for the pot. They had also seen wild pig, a large dark brown squirrel, some monkeys, and had come across a dead porcupine. They had returned in time for a rest before tea at 3 p.m. The villagers had long since preceded them, going with loads of gory meat at which Diana steadily refused to look.

On the homeward trail Diana went first on her pony led by the tracker, then came Ronald, then Fah Sien and a Burman boatman, with a villager in charge

of the pack pony, now additionally laden with the horns of the bison.

Carstairs brought up the rear.

It was still broad daylight when they started, but the going was more difficult downhill than up, and there were frequent stoppages, so that as they defiled along through the narrow ways the darkness drifted down on them from the tree tops. When they reached the spot where they had seen the dawn breaking they saw the effect, though not the actual appearance of the setting sun.

The broad streamers of rose colour thrown high into the sky like the spokes of a coloured wheel were fading into orange, and that again into pale primrose and green. A flight of hornbills, gigantic, ungainly birds, pitched from the nearest trees in the manner peculiar to them. Diana watched them as she waited, for the others caught her up before preparing to plunge downward into the denser shade of a nullah.

"Don't follow your mother up too close, Ronald," advised Carstairs. "The stuff here is like very soft sandstone and breaks off easily, and if your pony slipped you'd be on the top of her. We're all behind you."

Yet Diana did not feel happy unless she heard the stumbling hoofs of Ronald's pony on the dry watercourse behind her. The tracker seemed to make nothing of the gloom, but strode on so swiftly that she called to him not to go too fast, and then once or twice she cried:

"Are you all right, Ron?" Always getting the cheery answer from behind, "Right-o!"

As they neared the low end of the nullah her pony gave a great slither, but recovered itself, and after standing for a moment stock-still went on again. She could hear that Ronald's pony had also done the same, apparently at the same instant, and also recovered itself, and followed up the dry water-course as before, until turning out from between the steep sides they came on to easier levels over the leaves.

Diana half-turned on her small mount, and saw her son's pony between the trees behind.

"Come along," she cried, "we can go together here." But this time there was no cheery response, and with a slight chill at her heart she looked back again. The pony had almost caught her up now, was right on the heels of her mount; in fact, biting at its tail, so that her little tat squealed and kicked. But she could see now that Ronald was not on it.

"Stop a moment," she cried to the tracker, who understood what she meant if not the words, for turning back he caught the loose pony by the head-stall. Diana heard the voices of the others coming down the nullah into the forest, and, sitting there like a statue, she listened for Ronald's voice. Presently she heard Carstairs say something, and sang out with just a quaver:

"Mr. Carstairs, Ronald is there with you, I suppose?"

He did not answer, but she saw him coming dimly under the swarthy trees, pushing past the boys, who had stopped as she called. He came right up to her, looked at her and at the other pony, and asked: "Where did you miss him?"

The words went right into her heart like leaden bullets, and she grasped his shoulder with one of her strong little weather-beaten hands with such nervous muscular force as he could not have believed possible. "He was just there, coming down the nullah, a few moments ago. He sang out 'right-o!'"

"He *must* be all right," said Carstairs, and went back, while she called out loudly and hopefully, "Ron—Ron—where are you?"

Presently she turned her pony's head and rode again to the foot of the nullah, up which Carstairs had disappeared. It was very dark now. One of the men lit a torch, which glared redly on the stones, and made queer shadows dance swiftly round like black gnomes as he moved it.

With a great lump of agony in her throat Diana waited, expecting every instant she would hear the glad young voice, and see the boy spring out with some explanation. Then she heard boots crashing down the nullah, but only one pair of boots, and the constriction became torture. As the light flared upward she saw Carstairs alone. He came right up to her at once as she stood, for she had now dismounted, and put his arm across her two shoulders.

"Don't be too much alarmed," he said, in a comparatively cheerful voice. "I've known this sort of thing happen before. The blood has gone to his head after too much sun, or too much excitement, perhaps, and he's tumbled off his pony. We shall find him, never fear."

"Tigers? Snakes?" she gasped, both her hands held up as if praying to him.

"No fear of the first; there is no man-eater round here, or we should have known certainly. Very little chance of snakes." If she had said "panthers" he couldn't have answered with quite the same assurance in his tone, for though panthers will not attack a man, yet, after all, Ronald was not much more than a child, and in the dusk who knew what freak might not possess such an animal to leap wildly and strike him from the saddle?

"I want you to come up and show me exactly where you were when he called out to you the last time," he said. "Take a pull at my flask first."

"Right!" And so they went up the nullah together, she holding hard on to his arm without knowing what she did. Diana dumbly pointed out the place where her own pony had been when Ronald answered her last, so far as she could remember, but they found nothing.

The next thing Mark Carstairs did was to ensure that none of the men approached the place in the ravine to spoil whatever traces of the boy there might be. He then sent off some of them to the camp with orders to fetch back the little tent—the big one being too difficult to transport with the means at their disposal—also numbers of rugs, cooking pots, food, etc. He especially enjoined them not to go to the village or to tell any villager that might be encountered the state of affairs.

He made the two men who stayed behind light a huge fire, with due precautions against setting the surroundings ablaze. Then he and the tracker began

a complete and searching examination of both sides of the nullah.

There was very little fear of snakes in the forest here, and Diana sat meantime on a large stone, herself an image of stone, knowing Mark would do all that was humanly possible, and grateful in her torn heart for the efficient and workmanlike way he had set about things. At all times Mark had the air of quiet authority which becomes a man in the East. He never blustered or swore at his coolies as some of the commercial fraternity do. He issued orders as one accustomed to see them obeyed without question. He owned no superior. Even with Tom Marjoram who, from force of circumstances might be said to have had him under his heel, he was never in the slightest degree subservient; he spoke as an equal to an equal.

He returned to Diana several times in the next two hours, and always with some word of encouragement.

"No wild animal has been in it," he said, "you may put that out of your head. If any animal had sprung on him—and it's in the highest degree unlikely—he must have cried out, and also there would have been smashed bushes and a big trail where he had been carried along."

She shuddered.

"If it's the work of any men," he assured her, "he must be safe. There are no cannibals here, and they're not head-hunters either like the Wa beyond the Salween to the east. They could only hold him to ransom."

That also seemed to him in the highest degree

improbable. Any of the wild shy tribes of [redacted] knew enough of the power of the British Raj [redacted] quite sure no ransom would come that way; [redacted] swift and sure vengeance, with crops burnt, villages destroyed, and malefactors shot or hanged for such an outrage.

"Can't we wire to some Deputy Commissioner about it?" Diana asked tearlessly.

"Not an atom of use. The nearest wire is two days' away, at rail-head beyond the Chindwin. It would take the nearest political officer another couple of days at least to get here, and what could he do?"

So she waited.

The tracker and Carstairs, using the utmost caution not to spoil tracks, worked by the light of torches; but Carstairs was at last obliged to confess nothing more could be done that night. He had halloed loudly and frequently, and fired shots; the red glare of the fire rose high among the tree-tops, disturbing the inquisitive monkeys and blinking night-birds. If Ronald were anywhere around he was bound to find them. In the morning they might be able to get hold of some track which had escaped them in the dark, but to do more now might be to obliterate it.

By this time the men had returned from the river camp, and Fah Sien, bowing, presented cups of steaming soup on a tray as ceremoniously as if he had been serving in a drawing-room.

Carstairs took one and held it out to Diana, and after a glance at his stern, kindly face she drank mutely, knowing she must. Then like a wounded animal hiding her agony she crept into the tiny tent

[redacted]ad been set up, and lay full length on a couple [redacted]d resai. Carstairs spread a canvas for himself [redacted]ngside the tent, and lay smoking and thinking hard. It was long past midnight. The servants dozed in huddled heaps, arousing themselves now and then as the thakin got up and shook them, and indicated that the fire needed replenishing.

At some time in the deadest hours of the morning Diana must have fallen into a sort of doze from sheer exhaustion, for she came back to the awful reality with a knife-thrust of agony so bitter that for the first time she broke down and cried.

Carstairs, who had not closed his eyes, but smoked pipe after pipe, clenched his hands to hear her, and at last reaching out tore up bits of root and grass in his desperation. Then, finding it unendurable, he rose noiselessly and walked a little way off. He stood for a while, his forehead pressed hard against a tree-trunk, hardly knowing what he did. As silently, he returned. The violence of her sobbing had a little slackened, and at last she put her head out at the tent end and said in a whisper:

"Are you there?"

"Yes," he answered instantly, close to her. "Listen, I have thought of something. I am wondering—it seems madness, of course—do you think it could have anything to do with Min King and my little affair?"

She put out her hand—so cold it was—and laid it in his broad warm palm, which closed on it.

"I have thought that too," she said.

He spoke quite eagerly in his longing to comfort her,

"If it is, you may be sure Ronald is safe and well cared for. They would not hurt him."

"You mean they are using him to extract your secret from you?"

"Yes."

"But I don't see. How could they possibly do it without showing they were concerned in it?"

"Trust a Chinaman for that. He'll let me know all right."

"You mean he'll notify you in some indirect way that if you give up your cherished plan Ron will be brought back safe?"

"Yes."

"The devils!"

He laughed softly. It was a relief to hear she had still so much vitality.

"You can't give it to them?"

"My dear!" he expostulated, with a world of meaning in his tone.

She withdrew her hand gently. "You *would* give it up to get Ronnie back?"

"Whatever do you suppose?"

"It's not a small thing to you, and if, after all, he is safe and we know he is, and it's only a question of waiting——"

"Diana," he said very earnestly, without the least idea he was using her name, "if it were to restore him to you an atom sooner, it would go for nothing, of course."

"Well, say a week; would you give up your whole cherished secret just so that I got him back safe and sound?"

"Why ask such foolishness? Of course I would."

"Well, then, if it were only three days——"

"Yes, for three days."

"One day," she persisted. "If, remember, we knew he was safe, and it was just a question of my having him back in certainty one day earlier?"

He thought about that. He was above all things sincere.

"Yes, I would do it for one day."

She gave a faint little watery laugh. "It's like Abraham and God," she said, "or was it Noah? Don't be angry with me. Would you do it for a few hours?"

He laughed also, only too glad to keep her talking so that her mind was partly off her agony. "No," he answered, "not for a few hours. If I knew we could get him back safely at the end of say, twelve hours, I would wait, and not give them my secret. Do you know why?"

"Why?"

"It's not that anything I have or am wouldn't be a mere featherweight in comparison with your happiness for an hour, but because it would rile me so that those devils triumphed."

Then all at once the wave of misery topped over again and swamped her. "But we don't know, we aren't sure, they *have* got him. Oh, I wish I knew they had, it would be the best."

"I am feeling more and more certain of it," he assured her. "Listen. The village thugyi started out with us yesterday; that's an unusual thing for a head-man to do. He came up that nullah and on to

our stopping-place. Then he went back. I think Min King holds him in his hand, and has used him. The creature positively cringed before him. He probably owes him a sum he can't pay."

"Yes," said Diana, with a grain of comfort.

"Now the light is just beginning to creep in about the tree-stems," Carstairs continued. "As soon as ever it's broad day the tracker and I are going to search up and down a wide strip on each side of that ravine. We are bound to find *some* trace to give us a clue. If we do we'll follow it up; if not——?"

"Yes, if not?" she asked breathlessly.

"I'm going right back to Alonzat to see if the Chinaman is still there, and if he is I'll get it out of him."

CHAPTER IX

THE TWO-STRINGED FIDDLE

UPREARING itself on end rose the crag on which Alonzat was built. On the side where it was sheer to the river it showed a sombre broken mass of brown vitreous rock scarred and mottled with lichens and rock creepers. On the landward slope, facing westward, so thickly grew the glossy leaved mangoes, the tongue-shaped plantain leaves in their vivid green, and the feathery clumps of areca palm which towered above both, that the palm-thatch roofs were almost lost. Only by entering the stockade and climbing upward could the dusty beaten spaces, the tracks hollowed by the passing of countless feet, and haunted by yellow pariah dogs and black pigs, be discovered. Most of the houses were of bamboo, so fragile in appearance that it was wonderful they could stand against the wind, but in reality their very unsubstantiality saved them, for the high winds in certain seasons passed through them, as through a veil, without clutching them to destruction.

Along the summit of the crag, with their back verandahs almost overhanging space, and their open fronts facing landward, was a row of half a dozen much more solid houses of substantial timber and

more spacious design. They looked out over the tops of the tallest trees to the mighty outlines of the hills, folded into shadow or lying serene in the mellow morning sunlight according to their angle.

It was to one of these houses Mark Carstairs made his way the morning after Ronald's disappearance. It had been transformed from an ordinary mud-coloured wooden habitation into something which for the moment looked positively gorgeous. Strips of coloured paper and silk, such as those containing New Year greetings among the Chinese, were suspended from the ceiling, concealing the bareness of the interior and giving a festive look. Cushions worked in silk lay about in profusion, there was a gay gilt book on one side. Min King sat in the midst, in a festival gown of tomato-coloured satin, almost hidden by the glory of the silk fishes that sported in the regular ripple of the blue silk waves worked upon it. As Carstairs mounted the steps it came into his mind, in spite of the tense anxiety that held him, that the man before him gloried in the richness of texture and colour, and sucked from it something of the dignity that upheld him.

It was a game to be played with the utmost subtlety, and Carstairs hated subtlety, yet for the sake of the woman whom he had left forlorn up the river on the spit of sand, to whom he had promised cheerily, far more cheerily than he felt, "I will bring you good news," it behoved him to sharpen his wits as never before. Min King was seated in the midst of a pile of cushions, and as there were no chairs visible Car-

stairs removed his topi and sat down on another heap a little way off.

When he had seated himself an attendant Chinaman came softly forward and placed a decorated stool with cigarettes—excellent ones—on it beside him and a little ash tray. He then supplied his master with an immense meerschaum pipe, with a stem over a yard long. The mouthpiece of this the boy put into his master's mouth without Min King raising a finger. He then applied a light and retired. The Chinaman took two or three puffs and let the stem slip, and the pipe went out. At first Carstairs thought it was done accidentally, but when he saw the boy coming forward at regular intervals to repeat the programme and apply a fresh light, he gathered that it was intentional, the regular *haut ton* of Chinese smoking. Behind Min King in the dusky shadow crouched another figure holding something long and thin that could not be clearly seen.

"Perhaps you have not heard," Carstairs began gravely, after greetings, "of the terrible misfortune that has befallen Mrs. Forbes who is camping upstream. Last night she lost her son."

The Chinaman did not reply, nor did a muscle of his face move. Carstairs thought a European in a similar case would have been disingenuous enough to ask questions and express regret. Not so the Oriental, his deepness was deeper.

"He disappeared," he went on, "as we were returning to camp from a shoot. I had spent the day with them. He and his mother were on tats in front. We came down a quin. At the bottom Ronald's

pony was riderless. He had vanished without a sound."

"A wild beast, perhaps——"

"I'm of opinion it was," said Carstairs grimly, "but a wild beast in human form. The other sort is not so clever. He is more crude in his methods, and usually leaves traces. Here there are none."

"I understand then you have most thoroughly searched the quin?"

"We have searched far and wide, and can find no trace to speak of, a broken twig and a few displaced leaves are all. There is a doubtful mark which might be made by human feet in one place twenty yards away. The ground is very hard and dry, and at this spot there was a slight moist hollow. Whoever stepped there was careful, on feeling the surface slip, to work his foot this way and that so as to squash out the impression."

"No doubt you have your theory," said Min King, still gazing impassively forward to where he could see the light on the panorama of rolling jungle-clad hills.

"I have, and I've come here to tell it to you. But I have only one quarter of an hour to spare, because the thugyi is collecting the men to go over and beat the jungle far and wide for us, and I must return with them. They will not be ready for at least a quarter of an hour."

Silence.

"As it has certainly been done by human beings," Carstairs said, involuntarily lighting a cigarette as an aid to careful thought, "there must be a motive. The motive here cannot be cannibalism or head-

hunting. The only thing that obviously remains is gain; they may have done it for gain."

"You think then the prospect of a ransom?"

"Either that or payment from someone who has an interest in the boy's abduction. Burmans or Chins are as a rule not avaricious enough to undertake for a money reward such a really dangerous game as this most assuredly is for them, but I can imagine some man in a higher position than the ruck, say the village thugyi, may perhaps be in the clutch of money-lenders and be willing to take on this desperate venture for the cancellation of his debt."

Again there was a long silence.

Carstairs was determined to get some sort of answer. He leaned forward a little and repeated slowly and with emphasis, "It may be a village thugyi——" and waited. At last, seemingly from very far away, issuing from an alabaster face with glass eyes, came the response:

"It may be so."

"Ah!" He could have caught his breath in relief, but was careful to show no sign of excitement. "In that case the man who is directing the thugyi must have some interest in the boy's abduction——"

No answer.

Carstairs changed his tone and said with emphasis, looking around him, "I would give anything I possessed for the boy to be safe again at his mother's side."

After this there was a long pause, but nothing more came from the enemy, and it behoved him to make the next move.

"I came to you, Min King, because I know of your marvellous power over these people. I am afraid the thugyi is half-hearted about the matter; he was almost surly when I spoke to him. I want you to use your influence"—again very impressively—"so as to ensure that the boy will be found."

The Chinaman turned his head slowly as if on a pivot, reminding Carstairs irresistibly of the little china mandarins so constructed, and when he faced his visitor exactly he said suavely:

"Is there any reason, Mr. Carstairs, why I should exert myself to please you when you most distinctly refuse to be amenable to any suggestions I make to you?"

"So you do admit you made a suggestion to me the other night? Come, that's something. Well, Min King——" He paused, and it was astonishing how bitter hard the doing of it was when it came to the point. "'To each man belongs the fruit of his brain to buy or sell in the best market.' I'm a seller."

The head had been re-turned in the same precise way. Min King was now gazing straight ahead.

"Mr. Carstairs, I am willing to use what small influence I possess to persuade the thugyi to exert himself as you desire."

"I suppose that's as far as I can get," Carstairs said, half to himself. He felt as if he had been subject to some terrific physical strain which had left him limp, nerveless, and exhausted. Perspiration was running down his drawn face. His thin clothes were saturated.

"Understand, Min King, I'm no seller until I receive the price; that is to say, unless and until the boy is restored to his mother again by your agency, I do not consider I have received my price."

He rose and stood on the front of the wooden flooring preparatory to descending.

Min King raised his preternaturally long hand, looking more than ever like an image. At that instant one of the red vertical cards hanging overhead broke loose and fell to the floor. Mechanically Carstairs picked it up and looked at the quaint hieroglyphics on it. As he did so some shade of meaning passed swiftly across the Chinaman's face; it was not a smile, but rather the evanescent sign of an ineffable inward satisfaction. At the same moment a weird "thrum" like the wind in the tops of fir trees thrilled the air; it was like electricity rendered into sound. Still holding the set of attached red slips Carstairs glanced round, but saw nothing to account for the unexpected vibration.

"Mr. Carstairs, I have had many dealings with Englishmen," said Min King, as if unaware that anything had happened, "and certain Englishmen I know make a fetish of their word, in this sense they say 'my word is my bond.' What is your bond?"

"My word is my bond," echoed Carstairs, throwing back his head.

"So be it. I entirely disclaim any knowledge of the boy's whereabouts or his mysterious disappearance. Yet I will use my influence with the thugyi, and it may be that the thugyi, who is an old friend of

mine, will exert himself for me more than he would do for you. It may be so."

Another idea to clinch the matter occurred to Carstairs. He put his hand in the pocket of his jacket and drew forth a note.

"This is an urgent summons to the Political Officer at Fort Thaton to come to assist in the search," he said. "I was going to send it down by special messenger, by boat, but it will take two days to reach him. Perhaps, Min King, I had better leave the letter with you so that if you think there is any chance of your failing in the quest you would be good enough to have it sent at once."

"You may leave it," said Min King. Carstairs placed it on the floor. "Are these cards of any special value?" he asked, holding up the red strips which were blank on one side.

An extraordinary sound, something like the chuckle of a large lizard, but much more human, and, in spite of its malevolence, undeniably musical, echoed about the wooden posts. This time Carstairs located it; he took a step to one side, and thus brought into full view the pallid, lank-haired, expressionless Chinaman who squatted behind his master. He saw him clearly now as his pupils were enlarged to meet the gloom, and he saw also that the man was the interpreter who carried the two-stringed Chinese fiddle with the bow interlaced, an instrument which it is almost impossible for any but a native-born Chinaman to handle correctly.

Seeing the movement, the musician drew his bow deftly at an angle producing a long-drawn wail of

bitter regret, so soft that it seemed to come from the other side of a gulf of eternity. Instantly Carstairs knew how the weird scream that had so startled him and Mrs. Forbes the evening before had been produced. This satellite of Min King's had watched them from across the water.

After gravely considering these things a minute, Carstairs turned again to Min King. "I think," said he, making use of an odd whim that came to him, "this set of cards might serve as my bond. Suppose I fill up the other side with some writing and, say, a few engineering plans, and that I hand it to any native who may happen to be waiting about when Ronald Forbes—well and unhurt be it understood, having been subjected to no hardship or ill-treatment—returns to camp."

"You may keep it," said the Chinaman.

"Shall I have time, I wonder, to fill up the space as it should be filled to match in neatness and detail the lettering on the other side?" Carstairs asked ironically, feeling himself an adept at this game, a very diplomatist of diplomatists, out-orientalling the Oriental.

"I have not much idea how long you would take to make the sketches you speak of, but if something under twenty-four hours from now—it is within an hour of midday—if that period of time would suffice you, I do not suppose it will be demanded of you until then," replied Min King, with more promptness than he usually spoke.

The serang waiting in the river with the little launch found he could hardly get it to puff and blow itself upstream fast enough to satisfy the thakin.

Carstairs leaped on shore at the sandy spit with a glad cry which brought Diana at once to his side, and to his surprise he saw her smiling, though her face looked pitifully small and worn.

"Good news," he exclaimed eagerly. "Ronald is safe, in perfectly good keeping, and they won't hurt him. That old devil did it and will restore him. He has admitted nothing, but allowed me to know all. We shall have to wait, dear," he stumbled a little, "but not long; by this time to-morrow Ronald will be with us."

Then he noticed that she did not seem to be quite so desperately surprised and delighted with his news as he had anticipated. Without answering she caught his arm and drew him eagerly away into the jungle growth by the river-side. She looked back once or twice as if to make sure that no servants were following, and then turning by a narrow path behind a mass of thorn brought him face to face—not with Ronald—as for an instant he had expected, but only with Fah Sien, who stood patiently waiting, a neat and demure figure.

Fah Sien was not very tall, but broad and stocky; his flat, ruddy face, usually as expressionless in repose as those of most of his countrymen, was now wrinkled with perplexity.

"Fah Sien knows," Diana cried, speaking for the first time. "Fah Sien has discovered where he is. Tell the thakin, Fah Sien."

Very little English did Fah Sien possess, but Diana was so used to him she interpreted easily as he went along.

"Big rock must be—Yawtha rock—Fah Sien in wood—must be little master."

"All this morning since daybreak Fah Sien has been searching in the jungle, and he found—how, I don't know—that Ron is on a great rock in the middle of the river——"

"Water round him," said Fah Sien. "Must be one, two, three hour."

"The water runs all round it," Diana continued; "it is about three hours upstream from here."

"River-boat no can get."

"The launch can't get up there——"

"Anyone guarding him?" Carstairs asked.

"Little master there; no man."

"Then all we have to do is to go openly and fetch him away," exclaimed Carstairs; "they daren't attack us."

His vigorous mind threw off gladly the web of intrigue and subtlety so foreign to it, into which he had been manœuvred. "Why this deathly secrecy?"

"Listen, listen," cried Diana, clutching him with a force he could not have believed her small hands possessed.

"Min King he kill Fah Sien," said Fah Sien suddenly.

"Yes, I see, if he knew you had told us. No doubt he would. Yes, you were quite right not to let the other servants see you talking to him, Diana."

"Do you know the Yawtha rock?"

"I have heard of it, though I have never been so far up."

"All right, Fah Sien, you go round about back to the camp as if nothing had happened, and we will let you know what to do," said Diana.

The boy's blue-clad figure with its tightly-cased legs vanished quickly.

Diana sank down on a fallen tree.

"Mark," she said, "we must be very, very careful; tell me first exactly what Min King said," and he saw that she was trembling all over. Carstairs repeated to her, as far as he could remember, the turns and twists of the conversation.

"Now, don't you see, if we start off from here with all the servants we possess, and the guns and things toward the Yawtha rock, that old devil will guess at once what we are up to, and that you mean to rescue Ron, and consequently, that he will lose your plans. Do you suppose for one instant Ronnie would be there when we arrived?"

Mark gave a great sigh; he would so gladly have scrapped tortuous methods and gone in for direct action, but he was forced to acknowledge the justness of her reasoning.

"Now that I know Ronald is safe," Diana went on, "I am myself again; I can plan and plot against the devil himself. Of course I long—oh, you know how I long—to start off instantly. Poor darling, think of him there all alone, perhaps hungry——"

"They'll have fed him all right——"

"And knowing my wild anxiety——"

"See, dear, don't think too much about that, boys aren't quite like you in that, I've been one you know. He'll think of your anxiety, of course, but it won't

distress him so much as you suppose; boys aren't built that way."

She gave his hand a squeeze. "Well, what are we to do?"

Carstairs thought silently a long time, so that the monkeys crept down behind the tree-trunks and peered at the two motionless figures; then, as one of them made a movement, they disappeared like wraiths, and the forest seemed untenanted.

"You won't like what I'm going to say," said Mark at last. "But in spite of the news Fah Sien brings, I think it's safer, though hard enough, God knows, simply to wait at the camp until Ronald is brought back. A Chinaman is to be relied upon to fulfil a contract, and now we know where the boy is it won't be so hard."

"Is that what you'd do if you were alone?" Diana asked, looking at him very urgently. He coughed and didn't answer.

"Will you please answer me, Mr. Carstairs?" He glanced down at her earnest face, and in spite of himself his eyes smiled.

"Well, now we know! So we'll put that beautiful little plan aside, and I'll suggest another," said she. "We must make a pretence of looking for him the rest of the day, and when it's dark we must leave the whole camp standing just as it is, and take only a couple of servants, those we can trust, Fah Sien and your lugalé, and go ourselves and fetch him back. Once we've got him safe here, we can go home on the launch. Would they attack us?"

"I can't imagine Min King would start any firing, or open assault," admitted Carstairs.

"That's it then. We'll do it."

"Why not wait?"

It was her turn to be silent.

"You're thinking of my accursed plan," he challenged her.

But the woman was more subtle than he.

"Your plan of what?" she asked innocently. "Oh-h, you mean your invention; what of that?"

She nearly deceived him but not quite.

"You think I'm such a coward I'd rather let you run the risks of a night journey through the jungle with all the hardships and fatigue it entails, sooner than hand over 'the fruit of my brain,' as Min King calls it?" Mark said a little hoarsely.

"Suppose it's the other way?" Diana chirped.

"What other way?"

"Suppose I think you're such a coward you'd rather meekly hand over your cherished secret sooner than face the risk of such a night journey?" she asked.

"You may think that if it pleases you," he answered grimly.

"Very well, then I shall. We are free agents. You can stay here, and I'll choose to go with Fah Sien."

"You won't."

Diana rose. "It's not the least bit of good talking like that, because you can't stop me," she declared. "I shall rest now, and eat all I can to be strong for the adventure. Will you please see to it that the serang

has steam up and is ready to start down-stream the instant we return ? "

" That old Chinaman is wily enough for anything, and for the moment he has got us in a cleft stick," was all the reply Carstairs made.

As they neared the camp he said authoritatively :

" You go and rest ; you may leave all the arrangements to me."

" That means you are coming too ? "

" I am."

" Very well, then, I'll rest—if I can," and she vanished into her tent.

CHAPTER X

THE WHISPERING ROCK

CARSTAIRS was "all out." No sooner had he seen Diana disappear into her tent, than taking a waterproof sheet to lie on, to keep off unpleasant things that nipped and stung, and a cushion for his head, he drew into the thickest corner of shade he could find. He shouted to his boy to wake him in two hours exactly, and passed almost at once into oblivion.

Luckily for him he possessed one of those evenly balanced temperaments that can do with little sleep and take it at any time. When aroused, as ordered, he awoke refreshed, and after a wash in Ronald's canvas bath, he felt himself again. He sat down and began to think hard, and soon had his plans well under way. The moon was now at its height; so far so good, for the success of the expedition. It was obvious they must go by water, for though the jungle path on this side ran close to the river and would not be difficult to follow, the exertion would be too much for Diana, and the problem of getting to the rock, when they were near it, would have to be considered. He tried to recall all he had heard of this celebrated rock. It stood up foursquare in the midst of the river, with a flat top and precipitous sides. There was a superstition attached to it, of

course—it varied according to the district—it was full of gold, it was haunted, and so on.

To take the launch would be impossible. Shallow as her draft was, it would be too deep for the journey upstream; the only craft feasible would be a native boat. Yet to start off upstream in a boat, in the moonlight, would be to give a very obvious warning to the wily old rogue pitted against them. For there would most certainly be someone watching the camp in his interests all night. They must therefore somehow get a boat taken part of the way upstream, and moored there before nightfall, and then make their silent way to it through the jungle later, and continue the journey by water.

This was easy; a fishing trip might be the excuse. There were a couple of native boats moored near the launch, which Carstairs had hired for the time in case any of the party wanted to try their luck with the fish in the river. One of these would answer the purpose very well. Carstairs' first idea had been to take only the two body-servants whom they could trust, namely, Fah Sien and Moung Ka, but he realised that these two would not be enough, besides, they were not regular boatmen. There would have to be, in addition, at least two boatmen. A couple of the Burmo-Chins to whom the boats belonged must be detached and taken off; they would know nothing beforehand, so could not warn anyone. Fah Sien would have to detach them and fetch them along. The serang must know nothing, for he, Carstairs felt sure, would betray anyone for a rupee, besides, his slight degree of extra intelligence would tend to make him suspicious.

Having arrived so far in his cogitations, Carstairs called the lugalé, and gave him instructions for two of the Chin boatmen to be ready directly the sun was not too hot, say in an hour, with the fishing tackle, to pole upstream in one of the hired boats to try for mahsir.

Then he sat down again smoking in profound thought. It did not seem as if the plan could miscarry. Diana's argument for it had struck him forcibly, for he could not deny that if she had not been here he would have made an attempt to rescue Ronald. Anything rather than sitting tamely and seeing himself deprived of the "fruit of his brain." And if that were so, why should he hesitate to let her take her share? She was in every way as well equipped as himself for such an adventure. His eyes fell on the tips of the massive bison horns curving out of the soil, with their base buried, as the tracker had left them.

The scheme contained no risk to Ronald; at the worst he could be no worse off than now, and at the best he would be saved twelve hours' anxiety. For though Mark had reassured the boy's mother, he knew that any lad as thoughtful as Ronald must have suffered a good deal on her account. If they were caught in the very act, and any possible fracas seemed likely to result, Carstairs could stop that at once by the sacrifice of his cherished sketch-plans. This reminded him that he had better get them ready in case of emergency, and he took out of his pocket the strips of red card he had brought away with him from Min King's house.

He examined what he held with some interest, for

though he had frequently seen similar decorations made of coloured paper suspended from the ceilings of Chinese houses, these were slightly different. There were three red or crimson cards about the size of an ordinary postcard attached to one another lengthwise, not, as would have seemed natural to a European, with the broad lines horizontally. The connection was made by tiny strips of red ribbon gummed at each end, and passing through the cards in the manner of a certain sort of calendar, so that they lay neatly in a little pack but fell open if held up. The surface was smooth, just the thing for a diagram. On one side of each card were Chinese hieroglyphics, but the backs were plain. Carstairs took out his fountain pen, and, annexing a small folding table, set to work on the first one with a concise description of the idea and method of the machine in his exceedingly neat, small handwriting. It took some thought before he could put the matter plainly, and get it all in, but at last he succeeded fairly well. Then he used the two remaining cards for sketching the machine in diagram. It was a still afternoon, and very hot; everyone in the camp was asleep after their weary night watch. In these wilds the hours between two and four o'clock in the daytime are the deadest of all, corresponding with the same hours of the night in the man-made towns.

Mark was speedily lost fathoms deep in the fascination of his secret. He forgot Ronald, for the moment forgot even Diana. He had just finished when he felt the loathsome crawl of some insect along the back of his silk shirt-collar, and with a very loud expletive

sprang to his feet knocking off the intruder, a great hairy caterpillar, a giant of a creature.

He heard a short laugh, and saw Diana standing in her tent door.

"Not much matter for laughter!" he said rather sheepishly, stamping on the gorgeously furred beast. "His spines will be all over my neck and irritate me for days."

"As bad as that?"

He folded the triple card and slipped it into the breast-pocket of his shirt.

"Rested?" he asked.

"Yes; and you? What were you doing?"

"Nothing that signifies. Shall we have tea while I tell you the plans for to-night?"

So Fah Sien was summoned, and they ate smoky bread with buffalo butter, and jam out of a tin, and drank weak tea copiously.

"I'll go too," said Diana, when he told her of the mahsir plan.

"You'd better not. You'll want all your strength for to-night. Of course, the other side will see me go. No doubt eyes are watching us at this moment from that further bank." He indicated the steeply rising slope opposite, which left no possible path even for a goat along the river margin. "But they'll see me come back, and that will put them off."

"Very well, I won't." She looked much better for her rest, and was keenly interested in the tactics to be employed.

As he was not out with the object of catching fish, Carstairs naturally had good sport, and landed half a

dozen large white-fleshed mahsir or so within an hour. He had taken the boat into a little brushwood creek on the same side as the camp, about a mile further up, and when he thought it time to go home dusk was falling.

"We'll leave the boat here," he said in Burmese, which the Chin boatmen understood. "It's nasty work among those rocks in the dark, easier to track home." He gave the men the fish to carry, and noted carefully every foot of the way back.

Diana and he ate part of one of the fish for dinner; it was good enough, but she choked a little over it, wondering with each mouthful what Ronald had to eat. Again and again Mark assured her that his captors were certain to feed him well, and let no harm come to him. It was to their interest to do so, and however often he repeated it she yearned to hear it again.

The fish was followed by slices of bison steak, fairly tough, a curry of the young shoots of the wild plantain, a dish of fern-tops for vegetables, and some rice cakes, fried, and served with jam.

After this excellent dinner they rested again, revolving in their minds over and over every step of the way to be taken. Carstairs had decided to carry firearms in the boat, but to have only a revolver on his person, and Diana was content to be unarmed. In these latitudes the full moon rises approximately as the sun goes down all the year round, but it took some hours before it was sufficiently high to clear the great hilltops and reveal the valleys between. The sky was unclouded, but there was a slight ground mist which

served them well. As in all such tense times of life the moments stretched wearily long, and again and again it seemed a physical impossibility to sit there enduring them until it was feasible to set off. The time for the start had to be regulated by the moon, for no lights could be carried, and in the dense darkness of the river ravine they could never have found their way without the help of moonlight. The growing brightness of the sky warned them that the moon was there long before it rose high enough to serve as a lantern to their feet.

"It's almost at the full," said Mark, after one of their long intimate silences.

"The third moon," said she.

He knocked his pipe out against his boot, and when he spoke his voice sounded a little breathless. "You thought of that too!"

It meant so much to him, that she should recognise the third moon which had arisen on their joint lives.

At eleven o'clock, by which hour all self-respecting camps have usually long been at rest, Fah Sien and the lugalé unearthed the surprised Chin boatmen, and brought them silently to the trysting place. Then it was explained to them that the thakin were going fishing by moonlight, so the man who had carried the fish went first to lead the way back to the boat, followed by the two Europeans, then came the other Chin, and Fah Sien and Moung Ka brought up the rear.

It was dark here, though from time to time they got vistas of the molten silver of the river, on which

the great moon, now high in the sky, struck down vertically.

The eerie shadows and the small stirrings of the jungle under their steps as they advanced, combined with their errand, strung them both up. Carstairs insisted on actually keeping hold of Diana. He walked behind her with his hand on her elbow; he was not going to run any risk of having her spirited away! Apparently she did not object. Dauntless Diana had been tamed by this aching sorrow which had fallen on her, and all the womanliness of her had risen to the surface, she felt once or twice as if she would have liked to cling to Mark.

For a minute or two they stood on the edge of a clearing where a great tree had fallen, carrying down with it ropes and mats of foliage, tearing a huge piece out of the roof-canopy, and letting in the light. The Chin, who was leading, made a signal to them to wait until he spied the best way over.

"It's a tree where every leaf is pure silver," said Diana, in little more than a whisper. So it looked; the catastrophe had been fairly recent, and the great leaves lying on the ground caught the light on their shining surfaces, and gleamed like the polished silver shields of a fairy host.

"There's something very queer about this unaccustomed light," said Carstairs gently. Imperceptibly Diana came a little nearer to him, and his heart leapt to hear her say, "Take care of me," as she crept nearer still. A thrill ran through him, right up into his throat, and a sensation he had never known before, joy made manifest, seemed to flood over his whole

being. His arm was round her shoulders, and very low in her ear he answered :

" I wish it could be for always."

" I think I meant for always," said Diana softly.

He knew that it was only born of her forlornness, that her great loneliness of soul was reaching out to him for comfort because he happened to be the only one of her own countrymen at hand ; he thought that when once more she had her son by her side she would be again the jubilant Diana holding all the world at arm's length. Yet even that she had spoken so once would be a thing to remember all his life, and in his simple way he said so, but before he could find further words the man ahead waved them to come on through the creeping way he had discovered in the maze.

Then they were in the boat, progressing slowly upwards among the water-worn boulders, which lay thickly in places like half-submerged elephants, to be succeeded by a flood of pure unbroken water. The whole of the river was light, but the beetling banks on the Alonzat side were not respondent to the gracious efforts of the moon ; she had kissed them and passed on overhead, and their sour heights menaced the little party below in the fairyland of her rays, where the moss-covered rocks, water-worn and fern-plumed, and the long slender wreaths of the drooping creepers falling over into the water, were all transformed by her magic. Even the river was alternately streaked with quicksilver and the wide shimmer of dancing ripples.

But the way upstream, with the men poling and

paddling in turns, was long, much longer than they had expected, and Diana could hardly contain her vexation of soul, as time after time, gliding round a bend and peering ahead, they saw no mighty block cleaving the stream, nothing but the mocking silver and slate of the broken water. The Chin boatmen, when asked in Burmese, always said readily enough the great rock was just round the next bend, and when they had been proved wrong half a dozen times were as unblushingly confident and ready the seventh!

But at long last Carstairs, who was sitting with Diana in the bows, laid his hand on her arm, as at the same instant they saw it right ahead and not very far either. It rose about sixty feet high, and was oddly rectangular, with terraces on the sides so evenly cut it seemed incredible they had not been artificially made. Carstairs took counsel with the boatmen, who were standing looking at it with something like awe in their stolid Mongolian faces.

"They say we shall have to come up to it on the west, the Alonzat side," he explained, at length, to Diana. "The water is deep right round the base, but that's the only place we can land and climb up the rock."

Then there was more conversation, and he continued: "I'm afraid there has been some talk, and they know what we're after; however, it doesn't matter now. They have some tale about its being a 'whispering rock,' and they are most anxious for us to land on our side of the river, the camp side, first, and try to speak to anyone on the rock. I have heard something of that too, and one of the boatmen here says he can show us the right spot, where, even if we

are fifty yards away, we could carry on a conversation with anyone on the rock. Don't you think it would be advisable to try that way first to discover the state of affairs, if the boy is there and if he is alone ? "

Diana was shaking all over from head to foot with the force of her emotion. She nodded. " Yes, anything, anything, the quickest way to find out if he is there ! "

They ran the boat accordingly close to the shore on the camp side, which faced the western face of the rock now in shadow, running down sheer to the black smooth water at the base.

Carstairs helped Diana out of the boat, and they took one of the Chin men who had spoken of the " whispering rock " with them, leaving the other with the boat in charge of the Chinaman and lugalé to see that he played no tricks. The three who landed pushed up among the stones by the water's edge, until they came abreast of the rock, then Carstairs asked the Chin where they should stand, and in what tone of voice they should speak to get results. The fellow hunted about a while, but in a surprisingly short time found a great boulder a little way in from the shore, and squatted down with his back to it. He was apparently going to try experiments on his own account, but Carstairs promptly ejected him, and bending in front of the stone said in a low tone, not much more than a whisper :

" Ronald, are you there ? "

" Let me try," cried Diana, still shaking as if in an ague. " He may be asleep, but he'll wake with my voice." Utterly regardless of any stinging insects,

scorpions or even snakes there might be, she flopped down with her back to the stone, and said in a heart-rending whisper, "Ron—darling—sonnie. Ron." Almost instantaneously into her ear came an odd whisper. "Mother—darling, where are you?"

Standing upright as he was, Carstairs could hear nothing of any reply, but he could see by the sudden quiver and great stillness that succeeded it, as Diana held up her hand beseechingly, that she had heard something. She continued:

"I am here with Mark Carstairs, come to rescue you. Don't move, Ron, or stir until I tell you, or you may spoil it all. Just answer my questions."

"Right-o," said Ronald unmistakably. Just the tone and accent, the very word he had last spoken to her, that she had thought she would never hear again. A great wave of emotion seized her, and it needed all her self-control to gulp it down and keep a stern grip on herself.

"Are you quite well and unhurt, Ron?"

"Oh, yes, rather."

"You are a prisoner on the rock in the middle of the river, are you?"

"Yes."

"Are you alone?"

"No; there's a Chin man here."

"Can he hear me too?"

"No; he's snoring like a pig at the other end of the cave. Where on earth are you, mother? Your voice seems to run along down the wall beside where I'm lying."

"I'm on the shore, darling. It's a Whispering Rock

like the Whispering Gallery at St. Paul's, you know. But we've got a boat and we're coming across to rescue you, now at once. We have to land on the other side of the rock, the Alonzat side, because we can climb up there. Can you get up very softly so as not to wake the Chin and come to meet us ? "

" I'll try."

" Very well, we're going now. We'll meet in five minutes."

At first it had been to Carstairs like hearing someone speaking into a telephone ; he had been able to catch only one-half of the conversation, but for the last part he had put his head down to hear what was being said. There wasn't much room to spare on the surface of the rock, and in his eagerness he pressed his face close against Diana's, but she did not seem to resent or even notice it. Only as she finished she put up her two hands, and, before Mark could withdraw, had pulled him down the last two inches, and kissed him on the lips, and all the gladness of her warm, deep nature went into the kiss. Mark's arm had passed round her shoulders naturally as he half-lifted her to her feet, and in that moment they tasted life as few have the capacity or chance to do. Neither of them said a word until Carstairs, coming back to earth, looked round with a start. " The Chin ! " he cried, thinking the man had given them the slip, but a grunt from the shadows behind reassured him.

No one had played them false ; the two servants were waiting in the boat with the other Chin and quite ready to put off. They had considerable difficulty in manœuvring the boat across the stream, and

getting it up against the rock, for the current was very strong, but the men were evidently experienced and managed it at last.

This side of the Yawtha rock was lit as vividly as the eastern shore, and long before they had floated alongside they had seen Ronald's light-coloured clothes and dancing lithe figure on one of the foot-wide terraces. Carstairs had held up his hand to signal silence, so no cries passed between them, but as the boat came up level with the rock the boy leaped like a young goat into his mother's arms, which closed round him and held him tight, beating heart against beating heart, in the strong sensation of a lifetime.

But at that moment the Chin guardian on the rock, who had discovered the loss of his charge, dashed after him down the terrace ways, and as the boat was shoved off and the strip of water widened between, he leaped wildly, too, and landed safely on the boards. Carstairs confronted him face to face with revolver muzzle up. But the man grinned placably, handed over his dah hilt first, and held up his hands.

He seemed a harmless enough creature like his brothers in the boat, so, after a moment's consideration, Carstairs decided to let him sink down in the stern beside the steersman.

"Well, but there's Mr. Carstairs too," said Ronald presently, disengaging his left hand, which was all of him that Diana would let go. "It's you that did it! Oh, I *am* so glad to be safe again!"

"Had a rough time?"

"Not so bad. We played games, that chap and I,

sort of gambling games on squares marked in the sand. I was in a cave."

"But, Ronnie, we must hear all about it," said Diana, having sunk down still enfolding him in her arms, "from the very beginning."

The boat was rushing swiftly downstream, at a very different pace from that at which it had been forced up. At this rate in something under an hour they ought to be at the camp.

"It was extraordinary," said Ronald. "I was on that pony, and, suddenly, something like a mackintosh, with some filthy powder inside that stank like bad gas, was all over my head. I couldn't draw a breath to shout. It all got into my mouth. I went off just as you do when you have a bad tooth out. Next thing, I was in a boat, nearly here. I was a bit sick then, but it didn't last. Yes, they fed me all right; jolly well. By Jove! the water's coming in."

So it was. In the leaky hand-made Burmese boats there is often half a foot or so of water knocking about on the boards, but this was a flood! In an instant Carstairs sprang to his feet, and gave orders to make for the nearest shore, which happened to be the western or Alonzat one. The men, who had begun chattering like starlings, plied their poles vigorously, but it was obvious that either a big plank had gone or something equally serious had happened, for the water poured in like a flood. Diana and Ronald mounted the bows, and the men, now up to their middles, thrust and struggled to impel the rapidly settling boat until they were right under the high overhanging bank. Luckily there were some big

stones about, and on to one of these Carstairs sprang and dragged Diana, who entirely refused to let go of Ronald, thereby hampering him in his jump considerably. Luckily there was a dip in the shore here, which gave them foothold, and in five minutes more they were safely there, looking ruefully at the top of the bows of the boat, which stood up like the periscope of a submarine.

The servants had followed their master's example, and with their thin, soaked garments clinging to them were standing dejectedly about with chattering teeth.

Situated as they were in the inky darkness of the western shore, separated from the comfort of the camp not only by some miles distance, but by the width of the Yawtha river, their position was confused and difficult. Grasping one of Diana's arms, to make sure she did not in some way vanish, Carstairs demanded of the boatmen explanations as to the cause of the catastrophe. It did not take him long to realise that behind the chattering teeth of the personal servants there were only two dumb and ignorant Chins. The third man, the man who had leaped from the rock, had already disappeared, and not into the river. It was clear that he had been the evil-doer. His fellows were either too frightened to admit anything or knew nothing, while Fah Sien and Moung Ka were obviously cowed and mystified by the accident.

"That devil must have pulled up a plank in the rotten old tub, or opened some plug he knew of," said Carstairs at length. "No good going into that now, we must get shelter of some sort, and firing to dry our clothes, or we shall all have fever."

"I'm not very wet," said Diana cheerfully, still hanging on to her son in that chain of three and balancing precariously on the uneven ground. She was dressed in a short, loose coat of deerskin over a flannel blouse, and her cloth skirt reached only to the knee, where it met soft leggings attached to stout boots; so far as costume went she was as well equipped as the men for bush work.

"Moung Ka, ask those Chins if they can take us back to Alonzat this side?" Carstairs commanded.

"That can do master when the sun come, but way long, very long, no go by river, him heap difficult, must go so——" he waved an arm inland.

"That will do. Is there anywhere here we can camp for the rest of the night, ask them." He felt his boy's tongue could tackle the difficulties of these abstruse questions, so much harder than the usual stereotyped orders, better than his own. The lugalé was equal to the occasion. After a colloquy with an invisible Chin, he stated, "This man, master, him saying very good place up there, high; he showing, master."

"All right, lead on, keep close to him, boy, and don't let him go too fast."

Thus they started. But the warning had been as well, for it proved a villainous climb, up a muddy, stony bank at the angle of a house-roof. They slithered back on their knees, they displaced stones with their feet, they caught at trailing plants and found them thorny; Ronald's hat was knocked off and went down into the black void below, and no one could retrieve it. In spite of the coldness of the night

they all got hot enough with their struggles. The faint white mist had thickened to dim the whiteness of the river on the further side, and every leaf dripped moisture.

But at length they gained some sort of standing room on the level, and one of the Chins intimated his desire for a match. Luckily Carstairs could supply that, for he had not been into the river above his knees, and the contents of his pockets were dry. With the wise instinct of the man who lives close to nature, the Chin had found, even in the dark, one of the few firs that were scattered here and there at wide intervals in the district, and he lit the resinous bark which he had peeled off in strips where it was dry. The flare showed them that they were on a beaten mud terrace some six feet wide, which lay before a natural cave under the bellying dip of a mighty rock. Some time in the past a man had inhabited the cave, and added to its comforts with all the wisdom he had at his disposal. He had filled in the front with bamboo stakes, most of which had fallen this way and that in disarray. But in the middle still stood the two largest posts of wood, crowned by a log lintel with which he had completed the work. He had laboriously chiselled out a drip-stone running sinuously above his façade to prevent the heavy rains of the wet season sluicing in round the breast of the rock, and sending them instead in a glistening veil to the ground outside. Probably many a belated hunter had used the cave since then, but it seemed clean enough, for the hill-men have a sense of decency that would put many civilised beings to shame. The broken fence, re-

sembling a trap, and the haunting man-smell had probably kept the beasts from occupying it. Altogether it was a far better lodging than Mark had dared to hope for.

In an hour they were seated, not uncomfortably, drying themselves at a fire, which had been started by the pith of a large tree the Chins had sliced open with their dahs.

Fah Sien, with great satisfaction, had found a battered cooking-pot of iron in a dark corner, but there was nothing to cook in it. Some half-ripe and weedy plantains from a tree run wild outside had been tried and rejected by the Europeans, but the men, who had built a fire for themselves on the terrace just outside, ate them with gusto.

It was something at all events to be able to dry their wet things, and Diana, oblivious of all personal discomfort, sat with shining eyes and a flushed face, still unable to let Ronald move more than six inches from her. What mattered it that they were supperless, jungled—anything—so long as she had him there safe and sound? Carstairs, smoking a pipe, with deep satisfaction watched them, and wondered that a woman's face could so change; that afternoon it had been puckered, small, positively old-looking, now all its entrancing curves were in full play, showing radiant with life and youth.

Ronald had, of course, to tell his story again with all imaginable detail, but there was not much to tell. He had seen no one but Chins, the man on the rock and another. They were both in the boat which took him over to the rock, then one had gone away with

the boat downstream, and after some hours had brought back food; it was only a small boat, a little dug-out of local manufacture, not one of the more elaborate Pakkoku make. He had had plenty of fish and rice and curry. There had been a heap of twigs in the cave and a ragged sort of rug. He hadn't had the least idea where he was, of course. Yes, he *had* thought of his mother's anxiety, but he was so jolly tired he slept a good deal. When she had whispered in his ear he thought it was a dream. He was lying in the cave against the wall, and the cave faced straight outwards toward the camp shore; perhaps it was only in that position that the whisper could be heard. The Chin hadn't woke up with it, but then he was very sound asleep. It seemed to run down the wall and right into one's ear like a telephone receiver.

Carstairs heard every word, but all the time his mind was working on a line of its own, and the burden of it was: What will Min King do now?

It is the difficulty of these odd situations that there is no precedent to guide one. There could have been nothing quite like this ever before, Carstairs thought. It would have been hard enough to use sane judgment and act rightly if his antagonist were a European of like mind with himself, but an Oriental!

There was one point he felt pretty certain about, and that was that Min King would not either come up the river himself or send others up to rescue the shipwrecked party. He would be certain to know all about it by the morning at latest; that long-legged Chin had probably slipped through the "long, long" ways of the jungle like an old tsaing to tell him, but

even if he had not, if he lay low for fear of the Chinaman's or his own head-man's wrath, yet all the same Min King would somehow know all about what had happened; at the very latest when he sent up to fetch Ronald he was bound to discover it. And Carstairs could not see him coming meekly to the rescue and pulling them all back to safety and civilisation when they had certainly cried him check, which, but for an accident, might have been checkmate.

It was therefore obvious that they would have to make their own way overland to Alonzat, for they might wait days above this unfrequented part of the river before they saw a native boat to hail. Carstairs knew something of this side of the water, but not much of the part where they now were. He had been out game-shooting from Alonzat with Marjoram once, and he had a very clear recollection of a long ridge of hill round which they had to tack on a ledge pathway. It had taken them a day to do it. It was possible that from where they were now they might eventually have to tackle that ridge; if so, they must be at the very least two days' journey from Alonzat. In country like this maps are altogether misleading, or would be if any were available, because the ground is so trenched by ridges, so seamed with almost bottomless ravines that there is no going straight by compass, only certain tracks can be followed. Carstairs knew that it was perfectly true, as the Chins had said, that on this side not even a native could get back to Alonzat by following the river banks. They would have to go far inland and scoop round, he supposed. It was great luck, however, having these two Chins, thick-

headed as they seemed, they probably knew every elephant track on this side, and would be able to guide the party to some village where they could get food.

Yet with all that Mark Carstairs could not for the life of him imagine what was going to be the end of it all. Suppose they won through, and arrived at Alonzat on the evening of the second day, would Min King have vanished, having thrown up the game? Or would he have the sublime audacity to send out a certain distance to meet them and then demand the plans of the priceless machine?

This reminded Mark that he still had the bunch of red cards in his breast-pocket. An idea came to him.

"Can Fah Sien read Chinese?" he asked Diana abruptly.

"Fah Sien? Yes, he is a well-educated man."

She called him, and Fah Sien advanced into the firelight.

Carstairs handed him the cards opened out with the Chinese hieroglyphics uppermost, and asked him what he made of them.

Fah Sien's smooth brow became deeply corrugated, and his stumpy forefinger travelled slowly up the right hand line.

"Man dead," he said at length.

"A sort of funeral card," suggested Mark; but that did not seem quite to fit. Fah Sien looked at his mistress for inspiration, but she shook her head, unable to help him.

"To do make man dead," he essayed.

"He means a death-warrant," interpreted Diana, obviously catching his meaning aright this time, for

Fah Sien's wrinkles vanished, and, bowing, he handed back the cards.

"Thanks," said Carstairs briefly, replacing it in his pocket. "Curious coincidence that."

Diana looked at him, but refrained from asking questions.



CHAPTER XI

DIANA ASSERTS HERSELF

"I CALL that tricky!" said Ronald's voice overhead as Carstairs emerged from the cave in the early light next day. They had all had a most uncomfortable night, trying to ease their aching joints on the hard ground, and Diana had just fallen into a semi-conscious doze like those between bouts of sea-sickness. She jumped up and came out too. Ronald was on the roof of the cave, the top of the rock.

"What is it?" Diana asked, as she and Mark scrambled up beside him.

"Beetle-broth," he answered mischievously, standing over a narrow deep-cut hole full of the moisture which had flowed in down various man-deepened runlets from the drippings of the great overhanging leaves. But there was only one small beetle floating on the surface of it, the rest was clean enough.

"If there had been any bamboo about, we could have had a decent cup cut off at one of the notches," said Carstairs, "but it isn't bamboo soil here."

Diana was very thirsty, and went down on her knees by the little hewn tank; as she and her son looked across at one another with dripping chins, Ronald asked laughing:

"Hungry?"

"Hunger insatiable," she declared.

"The Immortal bard couldn't have summed it up better out of all his 60,000 words," he declared, mocking his mother's constant admiration for Shakespeare.

Half an hour later they were on the march. The Chins had declared they knew what direction to start in, and before the sun got hot would reach a hill-village; but they were obviously uneasy, and several times referred to "bud-mashes" or bad men, from which Carstairs judged that they were not altogether on friendly terms with some of the hill-men. Since the great lesson of 1897 the tribes hereabouts have been more or less under political control, and have certainly learnt that they cannot raid with impunity, but there is no knowing in these outlying fastnesses when disorders may break out.

The morning was certainly very trying, particularly as they had all started fasting. Sometimes they passed along jungle tracks which were by no means bad going, but compelled them to keep in single file; here and there it was much worse, for there were abrupt breaks, clefts or pits filled with tangled foliage, and though the tracks presumably continued as the men followed them, they were indescribably twisted up and obliterated by roots and creepers, fallen timber and rotting vegetation. It was altogether something like being an inch high, and trying to climb out through the ferns and thick growth from an overgrown ditch up a hedge-side.

After a while they came to a much clearer part as regards undergrowth, where they could walk with comparative freedom between bamboo patches; but

here the tracks, whether made by animals or merely natural, seemed endless, a regular maze, and more than once Carstairs had an uneasy feeling that the two Chins were hurrying on, pressed by their fears, without much more idea than anyone else where they were going. At one place Ronald, straying a little, walked headlong into a growth of nettles which might have come straight out of Wells' " Food of the Gods," and stung himself badly, his hands being covered with great white blisters.

" Who would have thought of nettles being here ? Real genuine home-grown nettles, but big enough to be trees almost," he exclaimed disgustedly.

" I've just seen some stuff which I'm sure is parsley," Diana said.

" Yes, there's wild parsley right enough, wild asparagus too, they call it tara, and celery and thyme in patches. I've come across them," said Carstairs, tying great leaves on to the sufferer's hands. " When the boys take the trouble they can find decent vegetables in most parts of the jungle, but we can't stop to cook them now."

It was soon after this they came on a last year's " jhoom," a patch of land on the slope of the hill, from which the vegetation had been burned off, and then mixed vegetables sown in the ashes. Desolate enough it looked, with the ghostly remnants of its once flourishing produce. A troop of monkeys, big and little, scurried or trotted away as the party came out from the undergrowth, one old man langur, slow and dignified, on four feet, turned to snarl at them at intervals until hastened by a clod of earth. But even

here there was nothing worth picking up, the rice and melons and pumpkins had all been scratched over and eaten down to the husks and stalks, and it was a very faint and weary party that struggled on leaving it behind.

It was now ten o'clock, and the sun began to be unpleasantly felt even through the high canopies of the tallest trees. But help was at hand, for chattering and gesticulating the Chins returned to say they were near a village.

After a good deal of persuasion of a peremptory sort one of them was induced to go forward to bargain for food, and came back after an hour with the head-man, who somewhat sullenly invited them to the village.

This Carstairs politely declined, but he offered payment for any food which might be brought from the village. Meantime the party all moved nearer on to a knoll outside the stockade, which was extremely well built, on a foundation of steep banks of earth covered with impenetrable thorn, and crowned by a regular chevaux-de-frise of bamboo stakes.

From their present position they could see right into it. The Chief's house stood in the middle, and was larger than the rest; there was a fringe of what looked like brown pots along the edge of the upper floor, but they were soon discerned to be skulls and heads of bison, thamin, and other wild animals burnt to the colour of earth.

This curiously remote little place, with its population of perhaps 200 people, seemed as natural here in the heart of the wild as if it had been an ant-heap or the nests of a colony of birds. It looked as if it had

grown out of the soil without the aid of human workmanship. The very stockade was growing as freely as the creepers all around in the forest; the houses fitting in between the trees, with their bamboo posts and leaf-thatch were as truly natural as the trees themselves, even the curious fringe of smoked trophies came right into focus. There were no corrugated iron roofs, no evidence of what might be called the paraffin-tin side of civilisation, which grips the vitals of a wild people brought into contact with machine-made things like an insidious disease.

When the head-man returned he had dressed for the part a bit, that is to say, he had put on his best dah, with a goat's hair plume tied with scarlet thread, and he was carrying slung across him a magnificent guyal horn for powder, which made Diana's mouth water.

"Bargain for it," she whispered, but Mark knew better and shook his head.

Some of the men who followed him carried a big jar and some palm-wove baskets, and with the jar were some hollow reeds apparently unused.

"The stuff in the jar is kaungyi, fermented liquor from rice, not bad; it will do you a lot of good when you're exhausted like this," Carstairs advised Diana, but she entirely refused to taste it.

He, however, was pleased. "Just what I wanted," he said. "You're foolish!"

The baskets contained brownish-looking rice and some dried fish, also some queer pieces of flesh, which were declared to be lizards' flesh. Ronald tasted it, and said it was "jolly nice," ate some, and shortly after wished he hadn't!

They all felt better for their meal, and had a strong inclination to go to sleep, so half an hour was allowed. At the end of that time Moung Ka was put forward as spokesman, to urge on behalf of the two Chins, that some guide from this village be persuaded to lead on to the next.

"They don't know the way then?" said his master.

"Knowing that way to Alonzat, master, for sure, but this little bit not knowing," explained Moung Ka lucidly.

The head-man had hovered near, and under his compulsion two rather unwilling tribesmen were at length told off for the duty. They were shorter and stumpier than the two Chin boatmen, much shaggier as to the head, and with unpleasing scowls fixed on their faces, "the scowl that won't come off," as interpreted by Ronald.

They started at such a pace they had to be checked, and therefore Carstairs went next after them, closely followed by Diana and Ronald, the servants and boatmen bringing up the rear.

The way seemed to lead at right angles to a series of saddle-back ridges and ravines, and as the heat increased the struggles to keep up got beyond endurance. The two guides, after some sharp speaking on the part of Carstairs, were at length brought to a standstill, and sufficiently cowed to wait sullenly while the heat of midday passed overhead.

It was a strange party. Diana lay panting on her deerskin coat, which Fah Sien had carried. Carstairs and Ronald, having no such resource, contented themselves with a log, and even that was "swarming with

ants." The two hill-men squatted sulkily on their hams under a tree, with an unrestful air of being ready to go off at any moment. The other four, regardless of insects creeping or flying, lay prone just out of sight under the trees. It was a dead world under the direct power of the sun, even the myriad insects were comparatively still, except for an occasional "ping" or a big drone.

But presently some green parrots began to chatter, then a bird with a sweet melancholy and slightly querulous note sounded at intervals, but its complaint was lost in the clamour of a whole flock of shrill-voiced minahs who made themselves heard in the tree-tops.

"Did you ever hear anything so like a lot of Chinamen?" Diana asked, sitting up abruptly. "I expect Fah Sien understands them!"

She looked across at the two sitting on the log, and something in Mark Carstairs' face evoked a wave of answering feeling in her. She had more than once defined his expression to herself as being half-stubborn, half-wistful; now the anxiety he had gone through seemed to have made both of these qualities stronger. He looked very stubborn, with abrupt lines of mouth and chin deeply marked, and in his eyes the wistfulness had increased. He was probably quite unconscious of it, but the effect of it on her was as of an appeal. She felt she could not meet it, and sprang to her feet.

"I suppose we shall have to go on, so we may as well face it," she exclaimed, as lightly as she could, averting her eyes.

It certainly was time to go on, for it was quite obvious from the demeanour of the two truculent gentlemen of the escort that they meant to be back at their own village before dark.

So that stumbling, hazardous journey began once more.

It might have been four o'clock; the party had reached a fairly easy level track passing through impenetrable growth on either side, and the leading Chins had just turned a sharp corner when they stopped so precipitately that Carstairs, who was keeping in close touch with them, nearly cannoned into their odorous moist backs. The men melted on each side of him, and he found himself face to face with two tall, thin, wild-looking creatures armed with old-fashioned, muzzle-loading weapons which they carried pointing straight ahead, blunderbuss fashion.

He recoiled, and the recoil was equally great on their side; it carried them some yards back, where they stood, exactly like surprised wild animals on the alert, uncertain whether to fly or spring.

Carstairs held up his hand and tried them in Burmese. No result.

He shouted back to Diana and Ronald to keep out of sight, and to Moung Ka to bring the Chin boatmen forward. But at the sound of his voice the two warriors in front tumbled into each other, and hastily disappeared the way they had come.

What to do now was a problem that would have taxed the judgment of a Daniel!

The first salient fact was that the men of the hill-

village had utterly vanished, and were probably well on the way back to their own fastness; nothing more was to be expected from them.

The new-comers being armed, a thing strictly forbidden by the Government, were obviously out on some raiding expedition. They were hardly likely to be alone. To go forward might be to walk into a hornets' nest. Yet in front the only clue to the tangle lay. To turn was to get hopelessly lost. Fortunately the Chins in the rear had not seen the appalling apparition in the path, and might be induced to lead on. After a few minutes' consideration this seemed to Carstairs the only course; it was possible the marauding band might have turned off in some other direction, and not be encountered after all. It would be hardly likely their nerves would be equal to the strain of facing white men in such an entirely unexpected situation.

The Chins, when appealed to, seemed to have some idea where they were now, and pointed onwards with more confidence than they had yet shown.

Carstairs took the precaution of relieving them of the provisions they carried, and handing them to the body-servants, and then sent the men on ahead. Getting his revolver ready for action, he followed close on their heels.

For a while all went well. These men reconnoitred every step, and peered this way and that, as if vaguely scenting danger; but all was tranquil. After an hour or so they came out of the narrow tracks into one of the frequent glade-like openings smothered in kaing grass, with clumps of shrubs growing beneath trees

not so different in height from those in an English park.

Then all at once the Chins stopped, and, exactly as their wilder brethren had done, began to melt away into the dense foliage on each side. Carstairs caught one of them by his brawny arm, and, holding his revolver very much in evidence, demanded what the matter was. Looking into the man's shrunken face and yellowish eyeballs he saw terror written large, but for the life of him could discover no cause, until the Chin raised one trembling hand and pointed, and there, not fifty yards away, sitting cross-legged on the branch of a tree, Carstairs saw a dark-coloured savage aiming a gun which he fired at the very instant he was sighted. In the explosion that followed both the boatmen Chins might have been blown to pieces, for they never appeared again.

Carstairs, finding himself unhurt, discharged his revolver twice in the direction of the tree without taking aim, as he did not want to kill anyone; then, as he fell back into cover, had a vague impression of a multitude of figures darting in among the scrub behind the black smoke.

Diana caught his arm and her white face mutely asked a question.

"No, I'm all right. I fear we'll have to hide."

He thrust her and Ronald back in the wake of the flying Fah Sien and Moung Ka.

"Follow Moung Ka; can't do better," he added.

It was good advice; trust a Burman to find a hole! But it was not so easy to carry out. Moung Ka went through what appeared like a solid wall of jungle

growth in a crack two inches wide, Fah Sien was after him. Diana, torn and scratched, was forced in also, and before entering on Ronald's heels Mark Carstairs looked round; no enemy was in sight yet; they would probably be very cautious about entering this alley now they knew that an Englishman holding a revolver was there.

The next few minutes were the most disagreeable Diana had ever had to go through. Every instant something switched her face or threatened her eyes; her hair was caught and dragged out in long wisps; she could not keep her felt hat on her head. She sat down violently without intending it, and the bush on which she sat closed over her, and gripped her as with steel springs. It required the united efforts of the whole party to drag her out, and the process was most painful. She put one foot into a hole filled by rotten leaves, and in jerking it out ripped off her gaiter buttons. She bent and stooped and turned like a contortionist, yet was beaten and bruised by boughs on every side. A handful of the dry dust of pine needles went down the back of her neck, and her mouth was filled with it.

But they progressed. However, when she saw the lugalé going head-first into what looked like a fox-hole in the ground, she rebelled.

However, his voice came encouragingly from some depths below.

"Good hole," said Fah Sien, pointing.

"Oh, Mark!" said Diana despairingly. "I *can't*. I'll sit outside."

Ronald took a header, and his excited voice rose so clearly that Mark cried:

"Ssh-ssh."

"It's a kind of ravine, mother; not bad at all. The hole is only through the tangled stuff grown over it. Come along, I'll help you."

So Diana did at last essay it, but nothing would induce her to go head-first. With Ronald gripping her skirt round her legs below, she wriggled in feet foremost.

The lugalé had certainly "run to earth" by sheer instinct.

They were in a small ravine or diamond-shaped crack in the ground so thickly overgrown with prickly creepers and bushes that it could not be suspected unless anyone went right over it and crashed through. Here they crouched, the five of them. The two servants, driven together by extremity of terror, clutching each other, Ronald snuggled between his mother and Carstairs.

"We must be pretty safe here," said Carstairs, after a long silence, "so rest at ease."

"Mother, your heart's beating so it bumps my head," said Ronald, with a queer little laugh.

"That's to keep touching you," said Diana, rather in her old bright style, and Carstairs' heart gave a great bound upwards too; so long as she wasn't unhappy all would be well!

"How many cartridges have you?" she asked him at length, rather breathlessly.

"A fair number; about twenty, I think."

"You'll have to shoot something for us to eat," suggested Ronald.

"With a revolver?"

"What a pity we couldn't have brought some stuff along with us, then we'd have been all right."

Diana made a movement.

"All right!" she echoed scornfully. "All the creepy-crawlies of the world are down my back. I'm going out."

"Whatever for?" asked Carstairs.

"Well, if you really want to know, to loosen everything I have on about the middle, and shake and shake and shake."

"Why not do it here?"

"Fugh! No room to stand up."

"You mustn't go," said Carstairs impulsively, forgetting his mentally registered vow never to lay direct commands or prohibitions on her.

"We'll see about that!" She was scrambling in the earthy soil to find the hole of entrance. A silence. Then, "Talk about lobster pots!"

"Who's talking of *them?*" from Ronald. "If it was cooking pots now. Fah Sien has been scrubbing for all he's worth at that specimen he found——"

"Dam fine pot!" came in a smothered voice from Fah Sien's corner.

Conventions seemed lost in this strange plight.

"Must you really go, Diana?" asked Mark.

"If I don't you'll find only a honeycombed piece of me left in the morning."

"Well, then——"

They forced and tore their way back upwards into a world in which dusk was swiftly falling, but there was no sign of savage or weapon or deadly peril.

The "shake" was thorough and complete, and

when it was finished Diana objected to pushing back into the den.

"I'd sooner be shot than smothered," she declared.

"In a couple of hours there'll be a wet, cold mist over everything. I can see and feel it now. We are far best in there; safest, too."

Diana looked round; they were quite alone in the whispering shadows. She crept up to him and put a hand on each of his shoulders, with her face looking up to his.

"Do you command me to go down there?" she asked mischievously.

"Never in the world, I implore you *not* to," he responded, his tone suddenly softened and warmed to an extent which those who knew the every-day Mark would have considered incredible.

She raised her face a little nearer. "I'll be good," she said like a child. What could he do but accept the lure and seal the compact? Yet he said nothing. He could but rejoice in the transcendent good the gods had sent him in the midst of so much evil, and being modest-minded above the average run of men, he did not presume on it or raise claims on the future because of it; no, not by so much as a thought!

"Hand over the provisions, Moung Ka," he said when they were once more in their earthy-smelling cage. "Best not to make any light in case those fellows are abroad. We can feel well enough."

"They could easily have tracked us," Ronald suggested.

"If they had wanted to, I suppose they could; but even if they didn't want to, they'd be unable to

defy such a direct challenge as a light streaming out if they saw it."

"Do you think Min King had anything to do with them?" Diana asked.

"Seems impossible."

The fish and rice, trebly packed in large cool leaves, bound by fibres, were palatable enough, but thirsty as the eaters were before, they were doubly so when they had finished the meal. The servants, who had munched their share, were of opinion that it was no use looking for water in the dark; moreover, they were "high, very high, not much water staying on top hills."

So they finally had to put up with their thirst as best they could, and they passed another weary and desperately uncomfortable night. But at the earliest possible moment, while it was still pitch dark below, Carstairs, who had been out to reconnoitre, declared dawn was breaking in that far sky beyond the canopy of the tree-tops, and they crept out, one by one, shivering and cramped.

Then followed another of those nightmare scrambles, which made Diana feel she could not stand much more. The surroundings did not look so difficult as they proved. They had got out of the labyrinth of jungle-walled paths into a clearer bit; here were no trees of very great height, but they were set closely together, the boughs stretching across and interlacing. It involved a constant pushing aside, stepping over and creeping under, which was terribly exhausting in the clinging wet grey mist. They couldn't hope to see the sun, for they might as well have been under

a succession of garden umbrellas, and yet none of the trees was strong or high enough for one of the men to climb up and ascertain the direction. They worked toward what seemed a certain brightness in one quarter, and the absurdity of not being able to get out worried them, for they were always just going to. Diana felt as if her strength was running out of her with every step, her limbs ached with a perpetual weariness, her skin had that parched feeling which comes from exposure, and her small face was grey with tiredness. Suddenly they came into country of a totally different kind. Small firs were scattered about clinging with sturdy rootlets to lumps of grey stone flung about irregularly. It might have been a corner of Scotland. A vision of a smooth, well kept, well-graded road slipping through just such scenery gripped Diana suddenly by the throat, and she felt throttled. She had never known the meaning of hysteria before; she had looked upon women who gave way to it with a kind of pitying wonder, but now it had arisen in her, and she knew it would need all her self-control to fight it, to keep it down, and not to betray herself. She clenched her hands and scolded herself hard. If Mark or Ronald had spoken to her then she was certain she would have flung herself down and screamed, but they were too much occupied with the new outlook, and after a desperate inward fight she got herself in hand again.

"Wouldn't I like something to drink!" exclaimed Ronald for the fiftieth time.

They passed on through the little bunch of firs, and plunged once more among tropical growths.

Carstairs said a few words to Moung Ka, who disappeared, and presently returned, his broad face gleaming, pointing with his finger.

"Come on," said Carstairs, "I'll give you a drink."

They followed the Burman to a great creeper, with a stalk as thick as a man's arm, hanging in a coil so that it looked like the body of a gigantic snake.

Moung Ka, seizing his dah, slashed it with two deft strokes, and holding the precious cooking pot below, caught about half a pint of liquid which flowed out. Carstairs handed it to Diana, who looked at it for a moment, and then drank, leaving half.

"Go on," he urged her. "There is plenty for us all."

She glanced around, and, seeing it was so, finished it.

"Excellent," she said, and sank down on the nearest stump.

Ronald, snatching Moung Ka's dah, hastened to the next segment of creeper, and with a vigorous stroke cut it clean in two, but no fluid came out! He peered into the hollow stalk with a face as comical as that of a dismayed monkey. "Dry!" he said, in tones of deepest disgust, but Moung Ka, smiling with great superiority, took back the dah.

"Cutting so," he explained, with two swift gashes severing another, and catching the trickle. "Always him cutting two times, then water coming."

"Yes, that's it," said Carstairs. "I don't know why, but you have to cut a piece clean out in two strokes or nothing happens."

"Water not wanting come, running quick back," suggested Moung Ka. "Piece cut, water caught."

" I never saw these creepers before in all the jungle where we were," Diana said, much revived, and pleased to find she could speak without a quiver of betrayal in her voice.

" No, we're at a great height here, and they only grow high ; we shall have to descend now."

And descend they did through weary hours, the air growing ever hotter and heavier as the sun rose. About midday they all rested awhile, and Carstairs made a discovery. They were sitting facing a clearing made by some jungle tragedy, and on the opposite side could see framed by trees the outline or backbone of a long ridge. He moved abruptly, studied it through his joined hands, and declared with an air of immense satisfaction, " Now I know where we are ! "

Diana roused up. " Where ? " she asked laconically.

" On the right road, anyhow. Only once have I been out shooting from this side. I started from Alonzat after wild elephant, and I came along that ridge ; we have to get round it, it's impossible to top, breaks back like the crest of an overhanging wave, but once round we are in the valley which eventually brings us to the foot of the Alonzat hill."

" Can't we start at once and get there to-night ? "

" There's a good bit to go yet," he answered. " We have to get right down to the foot of the hill here, cross a pretty big stream, and climb half-way up the other side of that range until we reach the flat terrace path, where there is goodish going. Bears live on that hillside. I put up a little Malayan bear with an orange collar, I remember, but let him get away. We

go right out there," and he waved his arm northward. "Exactly the opposite way from that which we want to go, then we double round the end of that ridge about half-way up, and so get back along the valley the other side. It took me half a day to reach the corner from Alonzat, I remember."

They went on downward, and presently, as Carstairs had said, they heard the babbling of a stream, sweeter music than any in the world. They seemed to have this wonderful place all to themselves, and when at last they arrived at the stream, and had drunk their fill and washed themselves, there was also a prospect of food. The two servants had eagerly hurried forward, and chosen a quiet eddy above the spot where they were camped.

"Watch them, Ronald; they're going to tickle fish," said Carstairs, while Diana lay, exhausted and bone-weary, but peacefully, on a slope near the water.

Moung Ka crept up with the utmost caution between the thick bushy growth and the large stones on the bank, and then reaching over remained as motionless as a brown stone himself. Presently, still soundless, he flung behind him a great eel-like fish, with a white belly and mottled dark brown back, which was pounced upon by Fah Sien in the capacity of cook. The wood in the valley was too damp to make good kindling, but he went to a tree and stripped the bark, laying bare the pith, and bringing back a handful used it for tinder with a few sticks. Carstairs gave him the matches, feeling that though smoke might be dangerous, food was essential, and, after all, the chances were that the hill-men had gone off in

quite another direction. They all watched the preparations with hungry interest, and when another fish was added, and the Chinaman threw into the pot some green stuff he had grubbed up, the interest grew almost too keen to be pleasant.

The tough leaves of a derelict plantain came into use as plates, and but for the lack of salt the meal served was excellent. Masters and servants alike ate royally, and lay afterwards in a state of comfortable repletion for the rest of the afternoon. Moung Ka had the cleverness to catch a couple more fish and cook them as provision for the way, before he also lay down and went fast asleep.

While Carstairs enjoyed his last fragment of tobacco he thought again over the events of the last few days. His burden was lifted from him. They were almost within sight of safety now, and his mind was relieved of anxiety. The Chinaman's evil machinations had so entirely failed that it was probable he would give up any idea he had had of forcing the plan of the machine into his own hand. In fact, seen now in retrospect, the whole thing was so monstrous, incredible, and like an evil dream, that it was difficult to believe it was really true.

If Tom Marjoram were at the bottom of it he could never have intended it to go so far as this. Moreover, the affair could not have been planned from Rangoon, because it had been dependent on circumstances; Marjoram could hardly have known that Mrs. Forbes and her boy would be on the Yawtha, or that he, Carstairs, should join them. If he had given instructions at all it must have been in the nature of a free

hand to Min King to do what he could to get possession of the plan. Once back in Alonzat, Carstairs thought, he would take care to pack Diana and the boy south without delay, and probably the whole thing would lapse. It had been an utter fiasco so far as the ingenious plot against himself was concerned. But there had been very unpleasant possibilities mixed up with it, for instance, in that matter of the boat, what if any of them had been drowned?

Carstairs thought it most probable that the Chin in charge of Ronald had been instructed not to let the boy escape, but to use no violence in any circumstances. He, in common with many of his village, was quite likely in the power of the Chinaman through his village head-man, who could make his life a terror to him in case of any disobedience. To loosen the plank of the boat must have been akin to the action of a disobedient and frightened child, who will do anything to prevent for a time the discovery of its disobedience and its consequent punishment. It was highly unlikely that the man had gone back and reported what had happened as a trustworthy European agent might have done. He had probably run off, and was in hiding somewhere near his own home, fed secretly by his wife until the fact could no longer be concealed. Carstairs worked the details out. Ronald was to be delivered by midday the night after their escape from the rock—the Chin, however, would not know that.

Min King's emissaries would arrive to claim him in the morning—yesterday morning, when he was sitting outside the stockaded village eating the village food.

Finding the rock deserted they would hurry back with their news, and by midday at least Min King would know. What would he do? That was the problem! Probably resign himself and wait for the next move on the other side. To do anything active would be to show complicity which might afterwards be proved against him. So far there was nothing which could be brought home to him, the wily old dog! He would most certainly notify Marjoram what had happened, but even by wire, cryptically phrased, that would take time, and Marjoram himself could not be on the spot for four days at the earliest, coming by rail to Kindat, and crossing the river.

What was the connection between Marjoram and this old spinner of webs? There was something—something underground. Now that their action in this case had plainly shown they played into each other's hands, Carstairs felt he had long suspected it without its crystallising into consciousness. Something very strange. Min King would not have done what he had done for any other Englishman certainly, but was Marjoram English? He sometimes spoke of himself as Canadian. He must have a streak of Spanish or Italian blood in him to account for those magnificent eyes.

At this point physical weariness overcame Mark, the smoked-out pipe fell from his hand, and he drowsed off into an exquisite sleep.

He awoke with a sensation that someone was looking at him, and, without other movement, opened his eyes. Diana was lying not far off, her face turned to him, with the cheek resting on her two hands, but

she seemed to be sleeping quietly. As he watched her, noting the outlines of that fair head and little body, now again as neat as they had been in camp, a delicious feeling of tenderness flooded his being. He acknowledged to himself that the world was a place of light and glory, full of thrilling possibilities, and he was free in it! So far he had lived in a steel cage of his own making, glancing out dully now and then, but now at last, like the prisoner of twenty years, he had simply walked out.

Then Diana opened her eyes and peeped at him, and he knew at once that she had only been playing "coon," for though the eyes were full of the sunshine of love, there was in each that mocking glint of mischief like the spark of red light that scintillates in the heart of the mazy opal. That was part of the irresistible attraction Diana exercised. She let you see, if you were one of the favoured few, what indescribable riches of love lay in her nature for the dower of those fortunate enough to win it, but there was always something which warned you against stretching out a hand to seize the treasure, lest all you should get for your trouble would be a shoot of pain from the burning spark!

They looked at one another for the space of a few of those seconds that count as chapters in a life, then she remarked inconsequently:

"The Third Moon is full to-night."

As she said it there rushed in on Mark a prevision he could have put into words to no human comrade. A vague, undefined apprehension that rose like a mighty column of black smoke shutting out the light of day.

The Third Moon!

He shook himself free mentally with a mighty effort, and seemed to catch beyond the smoke of depression a glimpse of an exquisite brightness to which he might win through. For the first time his mind reached forward beyond the jungle; beyond the return to civilisation, and dared to foresee a future in which he and Diana should not be separated.

The Third Moon—yes.

But what about the Fourth?

CHAPTER XII

THE THIRD MOON

THE sun was distinctly low, and the rich glow of evening had deepened the tints and coloured the shadows of the forest, when at last the little party were marshalled in going order with their faces toward the ridge.

They were rested and refreshed; they carried with them provision in the shape of cooked fish, and, best of all, the first outpost of safety seemed to most of them to be "just round the corner."

It was a hard scramble through the thick scrub bushes in the bottom of the valley, and a still harder one up the slope of the ridge to the path. It was not unlike getting up the side of a steep and greatly magnified railway cutting, but at last they reached the track, a mere rocky shelf cut out of the towering hillside, running between overgrown bushes.

They all flung themselves down to rest preparatory to marching onward while the light lasted.

The side of the hill faced east, and was in shadow; but the great parallel hill, down which they had scrambled that morning to the stream, was still in the full light of the quickly falling sun. From where Mark sat he could trace their course athwart it, could

see the open patch where that giant of the forest had been murdered by strangulation, and fallen carrying, like Samson, death and destruction to many another lesser one of its kind, leaving in its surrender the open space through which he had been enabled to recognise the ridge. And as he looked he saw something move there, a brown dot, and he turned suddenly cold all over as if powdered ice had been injected into his veins. He glanced around, Diana and Ronald were a few steps ahead, not watching him, but talking to each other; the servants were as far behind. So he looked again at the tiny moving object. A deer maybe—no cause for alarm; but even as he tried to reassure himself he knew that it was no deer, for, as the first brown speck crossed the open space, it was followed by another and another, stringing out like ants making a track. He felt that he could not be mistaken, this was a tribe out on the warpath; they must be the men of the same tribe which had been encountered the previous day. What were they doing so far from their own district? They could only be following up tracks, and what tracks, except those of his own party? To tell himself they were a day's journey behind was small comfort, for savages such as these would travel far more swiftly than he and his could.

Mark dare not ask the Burman boy with his trained vision to confirm or refute his horrible surmise, for, above all things, he did not want to awaken Diana's fears. And all might yet be well if they could only get along the side of the hill and round the shoulder before these men had overtaken them. For any wandering tribe would consider the valley on the

farther side of the ridge Alonzat territory, and, unless they meditated a raid on Alonzat itself, they would probably refrain from following there. Alonzatonians throughout the district were feared as being "very strong." They were very seldom attacked.

Carstairs' mind leaped to a swift decision. He must send his party on at speed, and must form the rearguard himself. He would tell Ronald, if he could detach him from the others, but not his mother or, he knew well, he should have trouble in making her go. Diana was as brave as a lion, and would insist on sharing, and greatly increasing, his risk. The path luckily was well covered, the tribe could not see them, though they would follow in their tracks easily enough.

Fortune favoured him. Diana had just caught sight of a glorious bunch of coloured leaves, and had had the energy to spring into a bush to get it; for the moment she was invisible. Swiftly Carstairs beckoned Ronald, who had glanced back before going to help her, and promptly the boy was at his side.

"Ronald, I depend on you! There is sudden danger. Don't give your mother a hint. The hill-tribes are on our tracks. Not near yet, but on the hillside where we were this morning; they may drift away again, but I must make a rearguard, for in a narrow path like this with my revolver I could hold them up a good while. I'll invent an excuse to stay behind, and you must hasten on with your mother and the boys as fast as you can. You can't miss the way, this path goes right ahead and round the corner; anyway, Moung Ka knows it, and can take you back

to Alonzat if necessary. You have some provision——"

"But you? Can't I stay and help?"

Carstairs put his hand on his shoulder. "I expected that. But, you see, I am giving you the post of honour, you must protect your mother from all knowledge of the danger——"

"Would they kill us?" Ronald asked.

"There's no knowing. I think not, but if it comes to shooting, no one knows what might happen. I hope to be able to join you very shortly, and when I come up you'll know the danger is over."

"Right!" said Ronald, in rather an awestruck voice. "I'll obey orders, of course. You are the leader, Carstairs." He spoke for the first time as man to man without the formal "Mr.," yet he was unconscious of it, it was the situation which had called for it.

It was difficult for Ronald, brought up as he had been in the heart of civilisation, to realise that there could be any actual danger from these tribes, and the knowledge that Carstairs viewed the matter so seriously came on him sharply with a thrill of excitement.

Diana scrambled back.

"I've got it, not much thanks to either of you," she exclaimed, holding out her spray.

Carstairs looked at her and felt with an overpowering rush all she was and all she meant to him. There she stood, a rather worn and battered Diana, but still with that trimness inseparable from her; her face drawn and thin, but with the glad brightness again in

her eyes, and the provocative charm clothing her as with a garment.

"I've just been telling Ronald," said Carstairs, in a perfectly ordinary voice, which made the boy marvel at his self-command, "that I want you and him and the servants to go on. I've seen some jungle fowl, and if I lie doggo, even for a quarter of an hour, I'm sure they'll run across the track down to the feeding grounds, and perhaps I'll be able to bag one."

"With a revolver?" Diana asked suspiciously.

"Why not? They won't be more than a yard or two away; you know we haven't got much fish, and they will make a fine supper, but go on, please, and don't make any noise. I'll follow up, and even if I fail I may get a shot at another bird, so I must be half a mile behind."

Diana looked uncertain; she stood poised there with her scarlet leaves in her hand. "What do you say, Ron?" she asked.

It was the moment of Ronald's life. If he failed to play his part the game was up. He nerved himself to follow Carstairs' lead, though his heart was thumping from excitement, and he was dreadfully frightened he might overdo it and give away the danger to his sharp-witted mother.

"Yes, let's go on. We'll only be in the way." He had the sense to stop there.

"Be sure you keep very quiet," said Mark quickly, "or you'll spoil my shot perhaps."

"How like a man!" quoth Diana, but yielded to the arm her son put round her waist, and departed,

bending and pushing to avoid the bushes, round the next corner.

Carstairs looked at the two boys who stood waiting for orders. "Follow the lady, and if I don't come up take her safe into Alonzat," he commanded. The Chinaman went with the pot over his shoulder, Moung Ka hesitated.

"I waiting with master," he began uneasily, an attractive little figure as he stood there with his pink turban still jauntily arranged in spite of the bush ordeal, and his lyungi newly washed in the stream.

"Good boy!" said Carstairs, knowing that the native's intuition had warned him of danger, even if he had not actually seen the Chins himself. "But go;" and reluctantly the Burman went.

The instant he was alone Carstairs examined his weapon, got his ammunition handy, and looked at his watch; it would take Diana and Ronald at least two hours to reach safety, or comparative safety, at the bend of the shoulder. It was now half-past five o'clock, and the darkness was falling like a cloak, by seven-thirty then he might feel free to speed after them, if the enemy had showed no sign. He had very little idea how long they would take to traverse the distance, but certainly he and his party had dawdled very slowly this morning, in covering the same ground, and then there was the long rest by the stream to be allowed for.

There was no sign whatever now of the presence of the hill-men. The bare patch which had revealed the secret glowed conspicuously broad in the last strip of sunlight, which had travelled up and up, and in a few

minutes more would be off the hilltop into space. Carstairs walked a good way up the path, and satisfied himself that the others had really gone on ; he could hear no sign of them, then suddenly he saw something fluttering on a bush, and recognised it as a blue ribbon Diana had worn round her neck. He took it in his hand with a great tenderness. Impossible it could have floated loose ! She must have left it here deliberately as a message to him ! Could anything be more redolent of her personality ? Still warm he could imagine from contact with her throat. He put his lips to it, and in his heart registered a deep vow that, God willing, he would bring her out to safety. Beyond ? At the moment the glimpse of the beyond which had seemed so possible in his visionary mood, half-sleeping, half-waking a few hours before, had vanished into hopeless void. Nowhere could he find it among the shadows of his mind.

He tied the ribbon round his own neck and thrust it down below the loose flannel shirt. Then he examined the ground. There was a place where a great rock jutted out into the track, forming an angle round which the path bent sharply. There was a certain amount of cover above the rock. It was a position where one man armed might well hold up ten or twenty, for the side of the hill around the rock was almost sheer cliff from which black burrs of bush projected here and there. With considerable difficulty Carstairs dragged himself up, and manœuvred into a position where, lying flat on the top of the rock, he could command the path which ran up to it round a curve. Then he waited. He well knew the

utter soundlessness that would envelop a posse of hill-men tracking, and was quite prepared to find the first intimation of their arrival was the appearance of a brown figure round the next corner. The worst of it was he had no means of parleying with the enemy, as he did not know their tongue. He would be driven to sheer defence, yet he hoped with good luck so to scare them that they would run helter-skelter from such an unexpected apparition as himself prepared to receive them. Moreover, in another hour it would be black darkness, and they would probably "get them away to their dens."

Some jungle fowl did actually cross the path, the proud cock in all the glory of his rich plumage and the harem of his hens following meekly. Carstairs would greatly have liked to bag one, but dare not in case the shot brought the enemy into his neighbourhood.

The hour passed. He began to wonder what would happen in the all unseen near future, would the next hour pass in equal serenity so that he would be free to scramble as best he could after the rest of his party, scratching himself among the dim bushes? He wouldn't be able to make much headway in the dark, and the moon would not be high enough to top the opposite hills until about nine or ten o'clock, but once it was up he could get on quickly. There was an unmistakable track down the other side of the ridge in the valley running to Alonzat. He would come upon the camp sleeping somewhere there probably. He remembered with thankfulness that Fah Sien had taken the matches, that was a detail he might so

easily have forgotten in those last tense moments. He hoped they would make a good fire if they were safely round the corner. They could eat the fish they carried for supper. Diana would perhaps be anxious about him—his heart warmed at the thought—but Ronald would reassure her.

He would get there in time to have two or three hours' sleep at least, what luck it was that there happened to be a moon! The ominous wave of depression which had swept over him as Diana said the "Third Moon" had completely vanished. They ought to be down in Alonzat by late afternoon the next day, he thought contentedly; possibly Min King would have cleared out, gone south, so as to avoid any appearance of complicity in the dastardly plot, thus there would be no unpleasantness for Diana to face there.

Next he pictured the three of them sitting on the verandah of one of the houses, it shouldn't be the thugyi's—he was quite sure that cross-eyed thugyi had had something to do with all the trouble—but another, scrubbed and scoured out for the occasion, drinking tea out of cups and going all over it again, "Do you remember this?" and "Didn't you feel that?" "I didn't like to say so at the time, but——"

Only two or three days! It seemed months since he had first joined the camp by the riverside.

Once safe it would be good to look back upon, something to think of all his life! He remembered his position again at this point. Another half-hour must have passed; it was much too dark to see his watch, but he opened it and felt the hands. He allowed

himself to think now of the other side of the picture, if the savages *had* come——

And they *had*——!

For there he saw them, and his muscles grew taut as the dim light at the curve was blotted out by something that had appeared noiselessly.

"Stop," he said in English, and made his revolver click. They stopped suddenly enough, understanding the click if not the word, and stepped backward so quickly they knocked into those behind and retreated pell mell. He could hear that.

After a minute one of them called out something without showing himself.

Carstairs made no answer.

A long pause, then two or three of them crowded together on the narrow path till they seemed like an amalgamated black patch lengthening the corner. Carstairs thought a shot, not at them, but past them would probably send them flying, and he tried it.

The wind of it hissed in their ears, and with a babble of terror they dashed back, and all was once more silent. He could hear a few pebbles displaced by flying feet falling into the bushes as they scuttered away, and he gave a sigh of relief. It seemed almost too good to believe that they had really gone. But the unknown always frightens savages. He thought he might wait half an hour and then go on his way rejoicing. It was difficult to judge time, each minute seemed so long. He set himself to count the seconds, and thus worked out to ten minutes. Surely ten minutes would do! He could scurry after the others now. He rolled over to get up. Then he felt himself

seized by muscular hands from behind, and pitched headlong over the cliff; an awful sensation of falling into black space succeeded, and a crash, and his consciousness left him.

But he was not killed, the bushes were too thick for that, and he had struck no rock in his fall. The light-footed hill-men who had climbed the scarped face of the rock like goats, and crept down behind him as noiselessly as shadows, had not intended to kill him; they wanted to take him prisoner, and having convinced themselves with sharp eyes that pierced even the lack of light, that he was alone, they had carried out this method of disabling and disarming him.

Carstairs' head had come into contact with a fairly thick stem which stunned him, his revolver flew out of his hand, and, after regarding it gingerly for some time, one of the men picked it up, while its owner was retrieved from the bushes.

When Mark recovered his senses he remembered in an instant all that had happened. The past was not slowly reconstructed, as it is sometimes after an interval of unconsciousness, but he picked it up from the moment of the fall. His head ached, and he was tied hand and foot, bound round in a way that made him numb. But what worried him the most was that a roll of something, he hoped it was his own handkerchief, had been stuffed into his mouth, and he could not expel it.

Those beasts had got him! He knew quite well how it had happened, and cursed himself for not having been on his guard against the trick. What he most

wanted to know was what they had done afterwards, had some of them pursued swift-footed up the path, or had they been content with their prize and retraced their steps? Anyway, where was he?

Not on the hillside apparently, for the ground here was comparatively flat, or, at any rate, fell only in a gentle slope covered with dead leaves; there were a few sparse trees, but it had somehow the look of a well-used place like the ground near to some village frequently trodden over. The moon was now up in full splendour, and though there were a few trees they were scattered, so the details were visible in a dappled light.

Then a sudden sound broke in on the silence, the roll of a drum, responded to by another and another; after that a yell and several yells, and some mixed hoarse shouting, more drums, mingled with weird clashing of some wild instrument. Evidently rejoicings of some kind.

With great difficulty Carstairs, completely mummified, slewed round inch by inch and turned his vision in another direction, so that the moon no longer shone straight into his eyes. He saw the gleam of red firelight coming through some sort of a stockade which was not closely set; inside it figures were leaping between him and the red fires, for there were several. It must be a hill-camp; the wilder tribes made these camps, lightly stockaded, in cleared spaces, and used them on the nights when they were out too far to get home. He had come on a deserted one once, he remembered. It was during some of his wanderings; when was it? Yes, he knew, on that very same

eventful day he went after elephant from Alonzat. Then he knew where he was! This one must be the very one he had seen. It was not far from the ridge, down beyond the stream where the fish had been caught, but a bit further than he and his party had penetrated that day. So far so good. It was something to know where he was; the next thing was to get free!

He made another mighty effort to burst loose, but the withes of plaited strands were wound so cleverly round him he was as stiff as a post; arms straight by his sides, legs trussed together. No one apparently was watching him; he lay outside the stockade, on the slope of the ground, his head upwards, and he seemed to be alone, but was he? As he bent his neck, which was the only thing he could bend, looking down the slope in the silver moonlight he saw a heap of leaves lying under one of the trees, and his eyes became glued to it with uncanny fascination. Was it only the trick of light and shadow, or was there another body there? For one moment his heart stood still, as he thought it might be Diana or Ronald, then he dismissed the idea, whatever it was it was not either of them. It remained so very, very still that presently he left off looking at it, and began to gaze elsewhere, but it seemed to draw his eyes back again, that little mangy-looking heap under the tree, and when he saw it move his heart gave a distinct leap. Yes, it moved, very, very slowly, one end of it, the end which terminated in a light-coloured blob; in fact, it was the blob which moved; it raised itself and waved to and fro uncertainly like a caterpillar

surveying the ground. Then there was a dragging movement, and the blob came out from the shadow of the tree into the moonlight, tugging the small dark heap which gradually elongated after it.

The thing continued to move, slowly, and with immense effort, and the moonlight then caught the side of the round blob, just before it fell to the ground and rested there. Carstairs told himself he was in a nightmare! His tongue became dry, his hair seemed lifting on his head, and the perspiration began to creep out perceptibly all over him, for what he had seen was a white mask in the image of Min King! He had never before seen Min King without any head-gear, but he had an awful foreboding that the white blob must be the top of Min King's bare head!

It was like a horrible vision of a dematerialised Min King, a Min King stripped of his flesh and projected into sight as a foul soul. The head, not much larger than a puff-ball, was covered with a kind of whitey-fluff or down, and appeared to be reared on an elongated stalk, as if the neck had been drawn out to extremity. Cap and pigtail, and with them an astonishing amount of dignity, had vanished. Below the reared-up part was the rest in a mixed heap, and as this, in its turn, had been drawn into the moonlight over the dry hard earth, it could be seen that it was the well-remembered blue embroidered robe, looking ghastly green in the wan light.

It was, it must be, Min King! But how in the name of terror had he got here?

The blob had now once again reared itself on its stalk and recommenced its persistent blind endeavour

in the swaying forward movement, grotesquely like a caterpillar, except that it was clawed forward inch by inch by the long white hands clutching at the ground. The wizened body in its robe was clogged somehow, not following freely, but held and bound by some force, it appeared to be paralysed from the waist downward. But though the swaying motion was that of a blind thing, there could be no mistake as to the direction it was taking. That horrible human maggot was coming to him! Inch by inch, foot by foot, yard by yard, the distance lessened in obedience to the determination that swayed the will.

A spasm of shivering seized Carstairs in spite of his bonds. If he could, he would have yelled aloud, infinitely preferring to bring down his captors on him than to be the prey of the crawling maggot so surely approaching.

But he was a living being pinned down hand and foot as in a nightmare, with the horror gaining on him. For one breathless second his mind glanced at the possibility of his being in an actual nightmare, so that when the culmination was reached, and the Chinaman touched him, he would wake to security and intense relief. But the events leading up to the position were too clear to allow him to draw comfort thus. He was reduced to watching that loathsome crawl and the slow lessening of the strip of parched and dusty ground that still separated him from the creature. It became but a yard, a foot; it had almost reached him! Another second and the skinny clawed hand, with its long nails, now engrained with the filth through which it had dug its way, descended on his boot. A spasm of abhor-

rence that was almost like a rending of life itself ran through Carstairs' nerves.

Suddenly there stood out in his mind, as projected there by some wireless telegraphy from his foe's brain, the words, " It do make dead men."

The death-warrant was still in his pocket, the breast-pocket of his shirt, unless the savages had taken it out, and they did not seem to have disarranged his clothing. He could not feel for it with his hand, but he was conscious of it lying like lead upon his chest.

Did this hideous wee devil know it ?

With grips reaching six inches at a time the bestial thing clawed its way up his gaiters and legs and on to his body, until it lay along him limb to limb.

It was recognisable as Min King, and yet in some surprising way totally unlike him. The fact that he was without head-gear made him somehow indecent, inhuman.

Waist-high he crawled, and then stopped, crouching, exhausted, his eyes glowing with triumphant devilry from the death-mask of a face. No tormented soul in the power of an incarnate demon could have suffered more than Carstairs did then. Every fibre of him was in a state of revulsion so terrible it threatened to disintegrate him into atoms. It was not so much fear as loathing that scorched him in the furnace of hell.

The foul claws of the creature began to shift this way and that, furtively, clawing Carstairs' breast, and all at once, feeling what they sought, the stiff doubled card under the thin stuff of the victim's coat, they scrabbled in an inhuman joy. It was the movement

of the long clawed armadillo grubbing up the buried dead.

Then there was a stillness succeeded by Min King making furtive dabs at his own raiment, and producing a small one-bladed mother-of-pearl penknife.

Carstairs regarded it with intent interest. That then was to be the ignominious instrument of his death! Would the infernal beast jab him all over with it? Try to reach the heart? Cut his throat by inches? Or open a vein? Like all men who have lived away from the hub of civilisation, Carstairs had habitually regarded his own death as an accident which might happen round any corner. But now life had become very dear to him, and the ignominy of being killed by a penknife, probably the very knife used by Min King to trim those loathly nails, almost stifled him! He prayed that Diana would never know the manner of it!

But Min King had another task in hand. He had settled down, and was picking with the knife at the thin stuff of the coat over the breast-pocket in the shirt. He did not displace any of the bonds, but getting the knife under the holland ran a slit along horizontally.

It came to Carstairs then that it had been a supreme folly to keep the sketch-plans. If he had not, even now his life might have been safe. But he had had an idea he might want the cards in a hurry as a life-assurance for Ronald, and he had had no remotest notion of meeting Min King in this wilderness. How indeed did this little white devil know the cards were there? Had Fah Sien told him of it? Dismissed as

soon as thought. Fah Sien had already risked Min King's vengeance by betraying Ronald's hiding-place. Some of Min King's creatures, probably that weird fiddler, must have watched him, Carstairs, from across the river as he drew that plan. He had been rankly incautious. Anyone seeing him from afar could also have seen him button the cards up in the pocket of his rough flannel shirt, and there they were still.

No, not now! For Min King had clawed the packet out, and, rearing himself on his elbows, began to examine it very thoroughly to see if it was what he wanted.

Yes, Carstairs might have had a chance even yet, but for the plan. That was the death-warrant! And it came over him, with the force of a galvanic shock, that Min King had known it long ago, when he was not a hideous, creeping, paralysed maggot, but a very prosperous and ornamental Min King, seated in all his glory; more than that, his familiar had also known it, or why that curious scream of triumph from the two-stringed fiddle at the instant Carstairs had picked the cards up?

Yet neither of them could have known then that he would draw his plans on the back, for he did not know it himself. Was it a strange power of projecting their minds into the future that had informed them, or had they compelled him to act as he had done by will-power? His brain was singularly clear and calm now, even that terrible storm of loathing which had convulsed him had ebbed away, and left him like marble. In a few minutes he would be dead, unless he could do something to prevent it.

He looked at the foul thing extended along his body. Min King was mad clearly. How else could he suppose this plan would be any good to him? What was the strange lien between him and Marjoram? How had he got here? It seemed that he also with his party must have encountered the Chins out on the path of destruction. They must have shot him, injured him in the back, so that his legs were paralysed, and he had been thrown out in a heap as dead, while his followers fled. But if Carstairs knew anything of those Chinese followers they would not be far off.

Min King refolded the plan, and rattled his long nails against it, his hands more than ever like those of an armadillo. Carstairs blinked. He had got to meet it. He told himself that even now, when life had revealed itself so full of glory, he could have met death with equanimity if it had been in any form but this, and again the most fervent prayer he had ever uttered went up to Heaven, that Diana might never know.

Why should the little devil pursue him with such malignity? He had got what he wanted. What earthly use could Carstairs' death be to him?

Almost as if he had framed the question with his lips the Chinaman answered it. He kneaded with the palms of his hands on his victim's breast, and then ran the points of his claws lightly across his cheek.

"Bastard," he began, in a strange, far-away tone, like the notes from a musical box internally damaged. "Bar-sinister, Mr. Carstairs. Dead should you have been long, long, but for the fruit of your brain, needed—by—friend of mine. Blood must be spilt to wash it

out. Your blood, my hands to be washed in it, to clean them, long time after."

He raised his claws with sudden ferocity, and made a motion of a deadly downward stroke, but withheld it before it fell. " Blood running freely, eyes and lips and nose for that cleansing," said he.

All in a moment Carstairs felt his body swell up like a balloon with the intensity of his exertions to burst his bonds ; all the muscles of that face, threatened with this hideous outrage, seemed to combine in one tremendous effort, and he expelled the cloth from his mouth and let out an unearthly screech.

He heard a rush of feet from the shadows, saw the outline of a Chinaman on the left, felt Min King snatched from his body like a baby, saw a gush of dark figures through the spaces of the stockade on the right.

Then there was a convulsion of sound that split and rent the air, as one of the old muzzle-loaders was discharged across his body, and at that his overwrought senses succumbed.

CHAPTER XIII

ON THE RIDGE

As for those others who had gone on obediently up the path on the ridge they walked in silence for about half an hour with Ronald in front.

Then Diana broke out suddenly. "Tell me about it."

He faced her, but the obvious, "What do you mean?" did not come; he knew his mother too well.

"All this shooting cocks with a revolver," Diana said scornfully, then with deliberately mixed metaphor, "It doesn't hold water a moment."

He laughed.

With a hop, skip, and jump she was beside the handsome boy, who stood on the pathway a little higher up, and caught him by the arm.

"Tell me, sonny," she said, in her most endearing way, "what was all that long confab about while I was in the bush?"

"There wasn't one."

"Well, the little short confab, then. What did Mark say to you?"

"I'll tell you when we get to the top of the pass."

"I'm not sure that I'm going."

"I am." Then, "He's all right."

During the long silence that ensued Diana followed him reluctantly, frequently looking back.

"Mother, you must come on," said Ronald, a new note of authority stiffening his young features. "The sooner we're at the top, the sooner he'll be after us."

That was a good move; she did quicken her pace.

"Very well," she decided. "I'll go to the top, as you've promised him, but not another step until he joins us."

The dusk had gathered up, and the sombre darkness fell in great brown swathes between the trees before they reached the highest point of the path where it curved to the west round the shoulder of the hill. It grew suddenly cold and was strangely still.

"If you're going to wait here, mother, you'd better get out of the wind," said Ronald, and with the aid of the Chinaman and Moung Ka he hacked and crushed out a space like a nest in the thickly growing bushes, directing the boys to line it with the coarse grass and dead leaves around.

The lugalé, when he had finished his labours, suggested, insinuatingly, "Supper, master?"

"I don't think we ought to light a fire here, but we could eat the fish cold. What do you think, mother?"

Diana was already curled up in her snug corner; she hardly liked to own even to herself how battered and worn she felt, and how a great gnawing trouble was preying on her mind. She had Ron, was not that all the world? She roused herself to answer. "I don't want to eat anything, but wouldn't it be a good plan to divide it into five, and then the boys can have theirs if they like."

Ronald accepted the suggestion. The fish from the iron pot was placed on great leaves on the foot-wide path, and with infinite seriousness at the tremendous importance of the task he sliced it up, Moung Ka and Fah Sien watching every movement of his fingers with tense interest.

He pushed their share over to them, and wrapped the rest in leaves, binding it round with the coarse grass to make a bundle of it before he crept in beside his mother.

"Ronald, you must tell me now," she said with that new note of anxiety in her voice, "exactly what Mark said to you."

So he told her, deeming the time had come. Diana listened without comment. "And when will the moon be over the hill?" she asked immediately he stopped speaking.

Ronald repeated the question to his retainers, whose jaws, hard at work over the fish, were distinctly audible in the bushes near by.

"One hour from now, master," replied Moung Ka.

"When the moon shows I'm going back along the track to look for Mark Carstairs if he hasn't come," Diana announced, "and till then we'd better try to get a little sleep; it's quite comfy here."

As Ronald assented, and fell into the even breathing that told he was almost off already, she began to wonder at herself. What possessed her? A week ago she would have said it was impossible that she should take Ronald back into that hideous danger zone from which they had just escaped, for, of course he would come too. Could she have ever imagined or believed

such a thing possible? Why, yes, she argued, of course she would have done it in any case, for any man who had risked his life as Mark had done for them, it wasn't personal, it was purely human. Yet she knew it was not! She kept putting man after man into the position Mark occupied, and though she was able to satisfy herself fairly enough that her sporting instinct would never have allowed her to leave any one of them in the lurch, even though thereby Ronald's life was held in the balance, yet she was bound to admit honestly that she might in most cases have waited until daylight. Also, she had to confess to herself that in another case there would have been none of this drawing of the heart-strings which gave her such thrilling pain that was yet not altogether pain!

It was some time back—judged by sensation it seemed months—that she had said to Mark she would like to have him there always, and though she had uttered it impulsively she had meant it. He could never bore her, and most men did so dreadfully! She felt she could rely on him to be always the same steady Mark, who would look at her with his deep grey eyes and tell her without a shadow of insincerity what he really meant. She could not conceive Mark acting one way before her face and another behind her back. He was sound rock. Diana was a woman who needed a man in her life; with all her sporting instinct, her independence, her man's sense of honour, she was not man but complementary to him. The wound from which she had suffered had gone deep to the measure of her deep heart, and she had felt that never

again could she believe in a man sufficiently to risk a recurrence.

Then Mark had come into her life, and swiftly, very swiftly it seemed to her, she had understood that here was a man whom she need not fear in that sense. He would never cause her agony through his failure to be a man.

So far it had got when she spoke out her mind, moved to do so by the terrible need she was in, but as she looked back at her feeling for him then it seemed to her a very trivial and childish thing to what she felt now. The few days in the jungle had brought this plant to giant growth.

Now she not only needed him because he was sound, reliable, reserved, steady, but because he was Mark.

Everything he did and said had become very precious to her. This new growth hadn't in the least usurped Ronald's place, but it was as if Ronald had had one whole section or plane of her heart, and that above or underneath it all the time had been a great space he could never fill. She had been barely conscious of it all these years, finding her life and joy in Ronald's plane, and now she knew that if anything had happened to Mark Carstairs, if, for instance, he had given his life in defending the rearguard, she would shut down that other chamber again for ever empty.

She did not sleep at all that cold hour, though she loved to hear Ronald's breathing at her side. She watched the gradual paling of the sky with the oncoming moon, but it was long after nine when it

appeared over the crest of the eastern hills down which they had journeyed that morning. She saw it first as a strange phenomenon, and thought it was a fire lit on the brow of the hill, some signal perhaps, and she waited breathlessly, hesitating to wake the boy until the last moment; but as it grew and grew, rushing swiftly upward, she saw that what she had mistaken for a flame was only a fragment of the rising moon hewn out by the pincer-like edges of a dip in the crest of the range.

She waited still a little longer, then rose quietly and stepped out on to the path. The way they had come was quite sufficiently illuminated to be feasible, for the rising moon caught the whole side of the hill as the setting sun had lit up the other side. What, oh what, had delayed Mark? They had heard no firing down there in the dark valley; why had he lingered? Was he there, living, breathing, held by some wound or trap, or was he past all thought, a breathless, lifeless thing incapable longer of the fears and pains that rent the woman who loved him in pieces?

Ronald soon felt the cold gap left by his mother's withdrawal, and after a minute's lingering on the borders of consciousness sprang into wide-awake life by her side.

"Isn't it beautiful?" he said in an awestruck whisper.

It was indeed. The glory of the great hills lifting their grand heads to greet the moon in her splendour, the blackness of the dark valleys where the light was momentarily rolling in like the fullness of a new tide, and permeating all the strange, unearthly glamour of

the light, and the curious wafts of jungle scents coming out on the cold night air.

To Diana the moment before it had seemed very still, but now the spell which had held her mind in its grip was broken, she heard all at once the breathing, moving night life, the odd chirrups, the far-away bellow, the sharp staccato scream of a harassed bird, the general movement of the wakeful underworld prowling for prey.

The boys were snoring loudly, breaking in on the chorus unmusically, and they grunted as Ronald prodded them into wakefulness.

Then they started, Diana first, Ronald so close on her heels he seemed a part of her. Fah Sien next, at some yards distance. They had not pushed their way a quarter of a mile back on their tracks of the night before, the bushes crackling at their thrust, and the small stones rattling down from their unsteady feet into the abyss, before Fah Sien coughed deprecatingly. Diana halted. "What is it?" she asked without turning, well used to this method of calling attention.

"That boy going Alonzat," said the Chinaman.

She looked sharply back.

"Moung Ka won't come?" she asked.

"Boy goes, goes queeck dilectly," said Fah Sien.

"Coward!" exclaimed Ronald, "little skunk. Won't even come to help his master. Well, let him go, we don't want him."

So they passed on, the unarmed three of them, a woman, a boy, and a Chinese house-servant. They went very slowly, looking to right and left for signs of any trouble. Several times Diana pulled up, her

heart leaping to her throat at the sight of some black patch resembling a prostrate body, but it always turned out to be the shadow of a bush or stone.

Once, before they reached a corner which turned rather sharply, they heard a swish and scutter, and the stones flew from the hoofs of some approaching animal, scared by the scent of them, but he was off and away before they could get a sight of him.

It was after midnight when they reached the place where they had first gained the path. Diana, skilled in observation of nature, had noted it, and was able after a few moments to make sure of it, and even to point out the bush which she had stripped while Mark Carstairs gave Ronald his orders.

They had drawn blank, no sign of anyone the whole distance!

"There is no other way," said Diana, and sank down on a stone to ease her tired feet, aching in the worn shoes.

"What shall we do now?" Ronald asked.

"Talk to Fah Sien," she suggested.

Fah Sien could throw no light on the matter; he was sure, quite sure, that Carstairs could not have come up the mountain side otherwise than by this one track, as the rest was sheer precipice, but where or why he had turned off he could not even conjecture.

"People wait this place," he said gravely, "light come."

It seemed all there was to do.

Not so easy here to hollow out a nest, but they made themselves tolerably comfortable.

"Don't you think," Ronald suggested, "we might eat that fish now?"

So the bundle was opened, and Diana, turning away a little, made great play of eating a small fragment of her portion, making it last out until, with intense satisfaction, Ronald had finished the whole of his.

"Do you think one of us ought to keep watch?" he asked, when he had done, and was licking his fingers.

"It would be a good plan, sonny; we might take an hour each, Fah Sien can start."

So they did, each waking the other in turn, and this time, quite exhausted, Diana did sleep. She was asleep in the morning when daylight broke at length, and opened her eyes a little later to find Ronald endeavouring to clean himself up a bit. There was a thick mist swathing the whole of their world, so dense and dank that they could see nothing of the valley below, nothing of the path beyond ten feet either way. They might have been in the heart of a ball of moist cotton wool. It was quite impossible even to mount the path again; they might make a false step and hurl themselves over the edge if they tried. They were nailed against the rock.

"It will lift soon," Diana said, more cheerfully than she felt. "We had one like this before. They often come this time of year. Come, Ron, let's divide Mark's fish; it will only go bad if we keep it."

She was savagely hungry herself by this time, and by dint of skilfully mixing her uneaten part with Mark's, and then dividing it again, managed to secure to Ronald enough for another fair meal, and there was a small piece for Fah Sien too. The plants

around were wringing wet, the great leaves of some of them holding the water as in a pitcher, and they managed to get sufficient to drink by tilting them up with great care. Then they washed their hands, and Diana took down her hair and re-did it, and, after that, what? For the mist was still thick.

Ronald suddenly grasped his mother's wrist.

"Listen!" he said, under his breath, and she heard the sound he meant mingled with the thumping of her own heart; it was a steady walk, the crunch of a European boot on the path.

"Oh, it's Mark!" she cried, and a gush of joy and relief flooded her aching heart.

"But he's coming down, not up," Ronald objected, as the steps came nearer; then there loomed up a man's figure, made more gigantic than ever by the thickened atmosphere.

Tom Marjoram!

It was indeed an unexpected vision, and a bitter disappointment. Yet, perhaps for the first time in her life, Diana was not sorry to see Tom Marjoram. For he at all events was a capable, strong-willed man who knew his way about in these tangled wilds, and he, if anyone, could find and save Mark.

Marjoram, for his part, did not seem at all surprised at the encounter. He came to a halt, saluted with a hand to his topi, and stood there smiling, radiant with health and good looks.

"I'm very glad to have found you, Mrs. Forbes; you must have had an alarming time."

"How did you find us?"

"As it happened, I arrived in Alonzat on business

yesterday morning, heard you were all messed up in the jungle, and were making your way out by this track. So I got together a few coolies and necessaries, and started off to find you. I met Carstairs' Burman boy flying, as if possessed, on the other side of the ridge, and with a little persuasion dragged the story up to date out of him."

As he spoke they could see behind him, gradually materialising out of the mist, the faces of a considerable band of followers, and amidst them, white and evil, with sleek black cut hair, the face of Marjoram's own Chinese boy attendant.

CHAPTER XIV

"THAT ONE"

It was still, very still, in the great cave in the hillside. Across the entrance, not far from the fire, lay a huddled group of Marjoram's followers. He himself, unbelievably long, swathed in a brown rug, lay straight as a pine stem on one side of the cave. There was an inner chamber. It did not open off straight opposite to the mouth of the cave, but round a corner where a jagged projection threw the aperture into shadow. In the corner so made Fah Sien, rolled in a rusty yellow wrap, was slumbering, across the opening beyond which lay his mistress and young master.

Ronald was in the dead, profound sleep of boyhood. But Diana was awake.

She felt that she had been slow to realise the situation, though it was some eighteen hours since Marjoram had walked down the pass that morning. And the eighteen hours had seemed as many days! At first, in spite of her knowledge of the man and his methods, she had been glad to see him, to see anyone strong and capable who could find Mark and lift them out of the morass into which they had fallen. She was chilled and worn by her nights out, by the physical exhaustion, nerve-strain and insufficient food. She was feeling very small and weak and incapable.

Marjoram had come well equipped. He had brought plenty of food, and such essentials as soap and toilet necessaries. He had suavely but firmly insisted that good feeding and rest were to be preliminaries to any enterprise by way of Mark's rescue. His servants cooked well, and after an excellent breakfast Diana began to realise that he was right. She had been very much perplexed as to how much of their own story she could tell him. It went against the grain to mention anything concerning Mark's invention, that she clearly could not do. On the other hand, she could not keep silence regarding the mysterious abduction of her son, though there again she felt very reluctant to bring Min King's name into it, since she only knew of him through what Carstairs had told her. At first no opportunity arose for telling anything. Marjoram asked no questions at all, and Ronald followed his mother's lead and volunteered no information, except as to the time and spot where they had separated from Carstairs.

To Diana's surprise Marjoram had not attempted to send her and Ronald back to Alonzat, for which she was quite prepared, and had been determined to resist stubbornly. He told her he had summoned help, before starting, from the nearest Political Officer, but at the very earliest it would be two or three days before any help could arrive.

After that he had brought them back on their tracks across the valley and established them in this cave on the side of the hill, which apparently he knew of old. He had done everything methodically, and refused to be stirred one inch out of his path. He was not

hurried or excited, and realising he must go about the matter his own way if Mark were to be saved, and that she might just as well beat herself impotently against the cliff-side as against his will, Diana had acquiesced. By midday she had her reward. He asked her to give him her account of how it was she and the others had been led into this plight. His manner was aloof, and she felt perfectly sure he knew of Ronald's abduction and the subsequent loss of the boat, and was asking to find out how much she knew. She confined herself to facts; the day's big-game shooting, Ronald's disappearance; she considered carefully as she spoke, and in order to avoid any danger to Fah Sien laid the discovery of Ronald's whereabouts on Mark. She ran very quickly over the escape and the sinking boat, but she felt that if Marjoram questioned her she would very soon find herself involved in admissions she did not wish to make in Mark's absence. To her great relief, however, Marjoram, listening attentively, said very little. He had not, up to then, given any hint of his own plans; now he told her he was going to leave her and Ronald with a sufficient guard in the cave, while he with the Chinese boy, and two others, took up the tracks and tried to discover in what direction the raiding band had gone.

He reassured her as to her own comparative safety before he left the cave, telling her that the raiding band were not in the immediate neighbourhood, so far as signs went, and it was highly probable they had withdrawn for many miles. "As if it mattered?" Diana thought contemptuously. She had set an iron restraint upon herself, had hidden her own thoughts

and feelings as in a casket. Once she had grasped that he had decided on a plan of action she had resigned herself; and when he left her, only then did she realise that in spite of the welcome food she was worn-out to the bone. However, she had cleaned and tidied her clothes as far as possible, and the process had given her back her self-respect. As she knew Marjoram could not be back for many hours, and that there was nothing to be done in the meantime, she had made up her mind to obtain the rest so necessary for any action that might succeed. She felt that Marjoram had intended this, and had only refrained from saying so by his fear of driving her into opposition.

So she and Ronald lay down on the piles of rugs in the cave, and almost before she had time to think of anything they had both passed into profound slumber. It had been nearly dark when she awoke to find the cave lit by a red fire tended by Fah Sien, who had prepared everything in readiness for tea. For the first few seconds her mind, balancing its way up from the great depths whither it had taken flight, had not fully resumed its functions. She awoke to a terrible sense of void as if she were hovering over some vast crevasse, which engulfed something for which her whole being longed achingly. For an instant or two she imagined it was Ronald she had lost, but her opening eyes lighted on his figure in boyish abandon, his lips breathing, his face rosy in the firelight, and then she remembered Mark, and her heart gave a leap of pain. Not so bad, Mark! Ronald was there anyway—*but*—Mark! Then she sat up and turned round,

Fah Sien, who had been watching her every movement, came forward, and, taking the steaming kettle from the hot cinders, poured the water into the enamel jug which served for teapot. In moving he chinked the enamel cups and Ronald also awoke.

They had tea together, and found it invigorating, and then they had talked of all the possibilities of what had happened to Mark. Again and again they went over each clue, always ending upon one bright spot of reassurance, no body had been found. If he had been shot in the skirmish surely the Chins would not have carried his dead body away. Therefore he must be alive.

The long hours of the evening passed slowly. The men replenished the fire and stacked wood for the night. Fah Sien prepared dinner, opening a tin of beef and another of fruit. But it was not until ten that Marjoram had returned.

As he stood in the entrance fresh, vigorous, and apparently as trim and clean as when he had set out, Diana's eyes sought his, and in the agony of her earnestness she felt her face going slowly white. He was grave, but composed and cheerful. His dark eyes fixed on her sent through her that indescribable thrill of terror and disgust, mingled with a strange drawing power or magnetism which seemed to lift the soul from her body. It riveted her and prevented her from saying a single word. In a rush came over her all the terrible concealed might of the man in whose power she was. Once in her young vigour she had fought him. She could never do so again. She had learnt that her only safety lay in flight. But instead

of that she was completely in his power, and in her craving anxiety she had allowed herself to look full at him, to give her eyes to his; the moment she had done it the life-blood ebbed from her heart, and she turned almost faint. She was unable to look away, unable to wrench herself free. That deadly magnetism had not grown feeble with the passing of the years. She saw a slight smile of satisfaction play around Marjoram's well-cut lips, and even as she cursed him in her heart he carelessly let her go, deliberately dropping his eyes, but she was well aware that it was he who freed her, knowing his power, not she who had broken away. He turned to Ronald who, standing by, had been perfectly unconscious of the drama of the moment.

"I am sure that Mark Carstairs is alive," Marjoram had said. "We have picked up the tracks; he may be wounded, but they have carried him further into the hills. Nothing more can be done to-night."

Released, Diana gathered herself together and questioned him, even while she ministered to his wants, seeing that the boys brought all he needed. There was very little he had to tell. After casting about a considerable time it appeared they had hit on the tracks of the body of Chins who had attacked the path. Had discovered they had passed the night in an open camp not far off. This they had left early in the morning; it might be about the time Marjoram himself had come down the hillside. He was almost sure that Carstairs had gone with them from the first, and when at last, following up the tracks, they came upon a marshy place showing distinct prints of a man's

boots he had been assured that at any rate Carstairs was not so badly hurt as to be unable to walk.

"To-morrow, by going directly to where we broke off, we may be able to find out more," he concluded.

As he sat smoking Diana nerved herself to talk to him naturally, but all the while there was an undercurrent in her mind, something in her subliminal consciousness which made her uneasy, it was not right, all was not right. She did not believe what he said, yet what motive could he have for concealing the truth? Had he seized Mark and held him? Did he know all the time where he could lay hands on him? Was he deliberately leaving him in the power of the wild men?

She was unable to think coherently. The mind of the man dominated hers. Each time she asked herself one of these questions she felt exactly as if some power beyond herself had taken her mind and thrust it away from such ideas.

Marjoram did not refuse to talk, but all he said was only a repetition, in other words, of what he had already said. It was like walking in sand, she seemed to be going forward, but the grains slid under her soles landing her back in the same place.

She was glad at length to retire into the inner cave with Ronald, which Marjoram solicitously visited and arranged himself, inspecting the bundles of twigs Fah Sieh had patiently collected to lay the rugs on.

Now in quietness and darkness Diana suddenly felt her mind her own again, some grip was released,

she could think coherently and without interference. She judged that Marjoram had fallen asleep, and there in the darkness she went over the facts.

What motives would be influencing Marjoram in his relations with Carstairs? That was the point to start from. Obviously he wished him alive and not dead, for behind everything lay the fact that he still desired the product of Mark's brain. Following that came the corollary that he would not desire Mark to be carried away by the savages into the hills with all the possible deadly risks to life. So far, so good. It was certainly true that if the facts were as he stated them, he could not have interfered to save Mark with the small force at his disposal. His story therefore at first sight looked very probable. But there was another and very disquieting reflection. He had said early in the morning that the Chinaman, Min King, had started into this district by the river way, on hearing of their attempt to get through the jungle, that he had in fact left before Marjoram himself arrived at Alonzat. He had not referred to this again. What if he had to-day joined hands with Min King and discovered that he held Mark in his power?

There in the dark Diana pressed her hands over her eyeballs until she saw red sparks. For if that were the case Mark was utterly lost. Unarmed, and in the power of a devil like Min King, no means would be beyond possibility to "bring him to reason." Here, where by a strange fatality his enemies had got him far from civilisation, what could they not do without the least fear of being discovered or interrupted? If Mark succumbed, what would be easier than to

arrange for the blame to fall on the Chins if indeed the dead body were ever found?

True, in the uttermost straits, Mark would certainly give up his beloved plan, but would that save him? Would it not rather be his death-warrant? Diana saw that just as clearly now as Mark had done.

She felt herself strong again, clear-sighted and vigorous. Marjoram's story might be true. In that case, especially if he had really summoned official help, Mark might be saved; but it rested with her, Diana, and with her alone, to find out if truth indeed it was, and if not, to play a game of life and death single-handed against the wily Chinaman and that curious anachronism, Tom Marjoram! She had not been able to wrest her husband altogether from Marjoram's grip in the old days, but she had got him away for a time. She would play to-day again for larger stakes, with all the experience of life and the training of brain and nerve which the intervening years had given her, for a man who was dearer to her than her husband had ever been. Dearer far to heart and mind and personality, though with none of the mad hallucination which had added a glamour in the first instance.

The memory of that terrible struggle came back to her, as she sat up, her head forward on her knees. The details had been overlaid by the dust of passing years; only the memory of a great horror had remained. Now the details began to stand out poignantly. She remembered how once she had made up her mind to kill Marjoram, because only so could she

stop the poison from spreading. For days she had thought of means, until she had become obsessed with the notion, and just as she had finally worked herself up to "an accident with a revolver," he had gone off and disappeared for weeks, and she had never been able to string herself up again.

Diana was a pagan at heart. A pagan of the wilds, and all her soft domesticity, and her womanliness, were but that adaptability which to her, a child of nature, was the first law of life. Her deep-hearted devotion to life, as life, was all because of the large things among which her mind moved. The things that mattered, those that underlay all her actions, were the wide issues which count on into eternity—the small conventions, the framework of the churches, the form of service were nothing, yet she did not know this herself; she was as unself-conscious as a true child of Pan, and if she had been asked her views on eternity would have said she had none. It was true. She lived by instinct, but her instinct was based on the soundest verities of nature.

Her mind made up, she crept without the slightest sound toward that yellow muffled figure across the opening of the small cave. She could do nothing without the help of Fah Sien. There were those who imagined that Fah Sien, with his pear-shaped face, and his broad, benevolent smile was simple. Diana knew better; in him, in spite of all differences of race and circumstance, she recognised a kindred soul. Fah Sien's loyalty was also broad-based on the eternal verities.

She put a hand firmly on his shoulder; she had no

fear of his waking with a betraying start or exclamation as a more nervous European might have done.

Fah Sien was awake in an instant.

"Lady," he said, under his breath.

"Lie still; don't move, Fah Sien. I want you to understand something no one must hear."

He remained motionless.

"Fah Sien, you talk that master's Chinese boy to-day?"

"Some."

"When he come back with his master you talk?"

"Me—no."

"This morning—early day, was it?"

"Early was."

Diana went on speaking in the broken English she used when explaining anything she wished him to grasp.

"That boy going with that master to-day to find Mr. Carstairs. That master saying me, Mr. Carstairs not finding, I not sure, thinking p'raps they find Mr. Carstairs and not telling."

She continued:

"You savvy that?"

"Fah Sien savvy."

"Lady wanting Fah Sien to-morrow to watch very quietly, hiding, when they boy and master go, following, hiding, hiding always, telling lady where Mr. Carstairs be."

"Fah Sien doing that."

Then suddenly—"Lady going that master?"

"No, perhaps lady staying here."

She felt a faint wriggle, something touched Fah Sien deeply; in a very doubtful whisper he asked:

"Lady tea, lady dinner eating—no Fah Sien cook for lady?"

"We must do without you," said Diana. "Only Fah Sien finding where Mr. Carstairs is, telling lady secret."

A deep sigh followed her as she crept back beyond Ronald's sleeping form.

It was, after all, Ronald who awakened her the next morning, standing in the aperture, exquisitely fair and fresh in his smooth youth. It was, of course, impossible that he could have grown in these few weeks, but he certainly looked taller and older than on the ship, with the thoughtfulness which had always been in his eyes now showing in the lines of his face.

"Just been having a swim in the stream below," he said, shaking the drops off his straight hair ends. "Topping! You should see Marjoram dive off a rock, I don't know how high, into a big brown pool. I thought he had broken his neck, he was so long in coming up."

She answered nothing, for the juxtaposition of Ronald and Marjoram for the moment caught her with a pang of pain, and he went on:

"Here's some water for you to wash in, in Marjoram's canvas bucket," and he put it down and went off whistling cheerily.

As Diana washed she reviewed her affairs from this new angle. Ronald was certainly firmer of character than ever his father had been, but there was something of his father in him. What if this devil of a man had planned delay to grip his talons into her son as a side issue? It must not be.

Directly Diana went out into the larger cave she noticed the absence of Fah Sien, whose thoughtful little attentions towards herself were like swathing folds keeping the sharp edges of the world from her. She had scarcely ever to ask for anything when Fah Sien was there; he watched her so closely and anticipated her wishes so intelligently that as she moved with a sudden need the need was supplied. As Marjoram's Chinese boy was also absent, it was impossible to expect the double deficit to be overlooked. For the first few moments, while Ronald talked about his bathe and handed the broiled fish the servants had prepared, every minute Diana expected a question from Marjoram as to Fah Sien. But as the meal went on she understood that he intended to make no comment, and that informed her better than any remark that he had noticed and drawn his own conclusions.

He spoke of the necessity of getting away early with some of the men, to follow up the tracks, and of the advisability of Diana's not going out of sight of the cave during the day. "Pity you can't come with me," he remarked, at last, to Ronald, who was standing near the entrance. Diana expected at once an indignant protest; of course he must stay with her; shouldn't think of leaving her, or something of that sort; and as none came she glanced up, striking across a meaning look passing between Marjoram and the boy; then Ronald, dropping his eyes, became red and confused, muttering something about "Of course he'd jolly well like it—but——"

They had already discussed it then! The poison had begun to work. Ronald shamefaced before her!

She was quite determined he should not spend the day with this man, but knew how to further her ends better than by compulsion.

"Ron is entirely free, Mr. Marjoram," she said, in the most composed and natural way she could. "If you think he wouldn't be over-tired or hold you back there is no reason why he shouldn't go."

But Ronald had regained himself.

"I'm not going," he said deliberately. "I shouldn't think of leaving you, mother; I don't wish to." He said it calmly and with a manner double his age.

Inwardly Diana gasped in relief. There was stuff to work on here!

Marjoram accepted his defeat without outward sign, and was soon on the trail. But to Diana the tiny incident showed that her prevision had not been at fault.

She led her son to a little knoll within sight of the cave, but out of ear-shot of the men who were left, and there she told him her thoughts and doubts and plans as to Mark Carstairs, using her quaint little expression, "That One," to signify Marjoram.

Ronald listened attentively, sitting on a swinging bough a little above her, smoking a cigarette Marjoram had given him. It struck her then forcibly that something had changed in their relationship. Ronald was years older than he had been a week ago.

"Mother, you *hate* Marjoram," he said, at last, quietly, when she had finished speaking. "You suspect him as if he were the devil. What do you know of him?"

She gripped her hands round her knees until the knuckles went white. Should she tell him? Yes,

agony as it was to tear open the old wound, it might help, might put him on his guard.

"Listen, Ron, you're old enough now to know what I have never told you, and never meant to. But circumstances make it necessary. Years ago, when you were a baby, that man came into our lives, the lives of your father and me, and worked for our ruin."

Ronald had never seen his dear, gay mother under the stress of such hardly contained emotion. It was as if some mighty force laboured within her small body and struggled to throttle her. She was very white. He put his hard boy's hand on her shoulder as she sat beneath him, and held it there very firmly and tenderly, and gradually she grew calmer and spoke again:

"I have never told you of your father, Ron, except in conventional lies. Now I will tell you the truth. He had good impulses; he had the making of a decent man in him. If he had been left to me I could have pulled him through, but Marjoram got his grip on him and led him into one vice after another, into the very hells and sinks of the West Coast of Canada. We were in British Columbia then. It pleased him to do it. He had no motive beyond that, I know. Though he made out of it in the end, that was not in the programme to begin with. He did it from the reason devils do such things, because it amused him to abase a human soul. He is born in man's shape, very splendidly made, but he lacks the ordinary human qualities. There are people, as you will find as you go through the world, who have no emotions, no feelings of their own, and they need

excitement, so gain a substitute for feeling by getting sensation second-hand, playing on other people's nerves and watching their wriggles. I sometimes think that is the explanation of it. I feel as if he were one of those bad spirits, who have been roaming up and down the world for generations, seeking tabernacles of human mould to enter in and play their game here." She looked up to see if he understood. His brow was knitted.

It was so strange to be telling him all this here in these bizarre surroundings, cut off from the world. With Mark, yes Mark, in such deadly peril; it seemed even as if she had forgotten Mark for some minutes.

"I fought him again and again," she went on, "sometimes I won; there were times when I thought I had triumphed finally and he had given up the game, but he always came again, and I was so tired."

Her head rested against the boy's knee, and his hand moved up to her neck underneath the felt hat she wore, and softly touched her hair.

"Then I summoned all my strength and carried him away. I arranged it all, I would not allow his objections; we went to China. For a little while we were happy again. Then this man came——

"We were in an old Chinese temple. It was a glorious day. You were there, a tiny tot, with the *amah*, very busy over some small thing you had found on the ground. I looked up and saw Tom Marjoram standing framed in the Shinto gate, smiling, and I knew I had lost——"

A long, long silence, so long that Ronald asked at length:

"Was it long after——?"

"I don't know, I forget, but the end came and I went, a broken woman, back to England. You saved me, or I should have gone mad, I think."

"I'm glad I'm a man," said Ronald, and she caught the dear hand from her neck and kissed it once, hard. Diana was not emotional or demonstrative, even with those she loved best, but when she gave she gave royally.

They heard a slight movement, and saw beyond the screen of bushes Fah Sien standing respectfully, hands in sleeves.

Diana sat up and shook off the hideous fantasy of the past, and beckoned him to come, but it was Ronald who took the lead and asked him questions.

Fah Sien could tell them something.

"Lady and master," he began, warily glancing round, "Fah Sien following Chinee boy, Chinee boy going Min King, Min King not ever so far—velly, velly sick."

"And Mr. Carstairs?" they both said simultaneously.

"Fah Sien not ever seeing. That Chinee boy saying to-night for ever sure Mr. Calstairs coming Min King. Be callied." He made a gesture as if his arms were bound.

Ronald met his mother's eyes and nodded. Her suspicions and surmises were then true. Marjoram was in touch with the Chinaman, "very sick," into whose power to-night Mark Carstairs was to be delivered bound and helpless. While Marjoram would return to tell them smooth lies, knowing the tragedy

which he had brought about, and the revolting scene going on even while he talked.

It was exactly the situation which would appeal most exquisitely to his extraordinary nature.

"It will not be easy," said Ronald, with knitted brows.

"No, we must steal out separately after he is asleep, you and I and Fah Sien."

In a moment her vivid imagination had seized on the grotesque inadequacy of it. A woman, a boy and a Chinaman, the last willing enough, handy maybe at close quarters with a knife—all Chinamen she supposed might be trusted to do that much.

Against what? Two unusually astute trained intelligences, one certainly "very sick," but surrounded presumably by a number of obedient servants.

"Will the Chins stop us?" Ronald asked.

"I don't know; haven't the least idea. Maybe we shall be made prisoners, but we've got to try. It's a forlorn hope, Ron; we take our lives in our hands. But, knowing what we know, is there any possibility of lying down with a little folding of the hands and closing of the ears while Mark is carried bound to that hideous fate?"

Ronald smiled tenderly at her. "We must think out all the details carefully to give ourselves a chance," he said. "What about that long yellow robe Fah Sien rolls himself in like a cocoon at nights? If you wrapped it round you as you passed through the outer cave, and Marjoram did happen to sleep with one eye open, he might think it was only Fah Sien."

CHAPTER XV

THE SOUL OF THE FIDDLER

AT six Diana and Ronald grew restless in the expectation of hearing Marjoram returning, and the anticipation of keeping up before him that pretence which was alien from their natures. They discussed it in low tones.

"The less one says on these occasions the better," advised Diana.

But all their planning and contriving was wasted, for Marjoram never came!

Two hours passed—they might have been six! At eight they had supper.

Two more hours, ten o'clock, and no Marjoram!

"It's no use waiting any more," said Diana, with sudden energy. "The moon is up. We must go. Even now Mark may be in their clutches."

She selected the lightest of the rifles belonging to Marjoram, with suitable ammunition, and gave it to Fah Sien to carry. Ronald took a water-bottle slung across his shoulders, and some of the native-made bread.

A few of the village Chins who had been left at the cave were sleeping near the entrance. Diana had wondered if Marjoram had given orders that they were

to follow and watch her if she strayed, but apparently not, because, though one or two looked up and grunted, they made no further movement. These men, in comparison with their brethren of the wilder hill-tracts, might be considered civilised and almost reliable.

There was a mist in the valley below, but here on the heights it was hardly discernible. As they plunged downward in the wake of Fah Sien, they came clearly into view of it, lying like a sea of quick-silver within the encompassing hills which rose in black promontories and capes around it. Then, little by little, it drew about them as they descended, but so gradually that it was not until they reached the stream they felt they must be in the heart of it. The stems of the trees around rose ghostly one by one, and it was only possible to see the great stones in the stream singly; the further shore, with Fah Sien's voice coming from it, was lost to sight. Ronald's strong brown hand was, however, always there just in front to steady his mother as she hopped lightly as a bird from one step to another.

Then they had to begin climbing again, a most tedious ascent, not in the direction they had taken to reach Alonzat, but, as Ronald called it, "inland," and as they rose the struggle became harder and harder, even though they were leaving behind the mist, which to-night seemed to roll heavily to the lowest levels.

Diana felt no fear, only a strange exhilaration as if the very crisis of her life had come. Yet everything was so unreal. Since leaving behind the rattle and

swish of the water an odd stillness lay on all things as if the district were held in the grip of a silent frost, which forbade movement to leaf or twig.

The air was cold, but the exertion kept the blood running warmly in their veins.

At last Diana, feeling her breath come faster, called for a halt.

"Is it much further, Fah Sien?"

"Not far, lady," replied the Chinaman, as he had replied invariably ever since they started.

"I think we've come pretty far already," commented Ronald; "it must be midnight."

Fah Sien led steadily onward, skirting along the side of the hill, avoiding the thickest undergrowth, and never pausing or hesitating.

To Diana it still seemed extraordinarily unreal. She wondered whether, if she saw Mark suddenly, it would all become real, and she would be able to feel afraid again, and it struck her as odd what a hideous, unnatural thing it was not to feel afraid—one might as well be a spirit!

Being afraid was one of the most human, the most linking things.

But Fah Sien had stopped.

"Lady waiting here," he explained cautiously. "Fah Sien must be looking." Ronald took the rifle from him before he passed on, while Diana breathed relievedly at being able to stop.

"He means he is not exactly sure of the way now. We must be somewhere quite near," said Ronald, with his arm round his mother. "Don't you think, dearest, I had better keep the rifle? I know I'm not anywhere

near you as a shot, but if it did come to shooting—*them*, perhaps you wouldn't like it."

Diana gave a little chuckle. It was all part of the dream atmosphere that Ronald should talk like this, but in her present mood she really wouldn't have minded shooting Marjoram any more than potting a mushroom.

"Keep it, sonny," she said.

"Fah Sien is a long time," Ronald remarked, after a tense silence. "I wish there was somewhere for you to sit down; but in the dark here it isn't safe, there might be centipedes or tarantulas."

"It doesn't matter," said Diana. "What do you think will happen?"

"If Min King is really sick, he can't do much," said Ronald, healthily contemptuous. "Fah Sien's got an Ai knife, he could cut Mark's bonds while you or I held up the rest with the rifle; most likely they'd run."

Diana felt herself becoming alive again, and the process was distinctly unpleasant; something of the nature of coming alive in the case of frozen fingers, only far, far more comprehensive. An agonised tingling, but it was not physical. In spite of all her bygone experiences, her heart and feelings were not blunted, and she knew there would be shooting, and, possibly, nay probably, human blood running before the morning broadened into day. She saw suddenly the desperate absurdity of the expedition; what could she and Ronald do against a wild horde? In that moment she tasted all the bitterness of death, not only for herself, but for him. Fully realised painful, sudden death; and the words of the Litany,

she had so little considered, came sweeping over her, "From battle and murder, and sudden death, Good Lord, deliver us."

A temptation assailed her that she would in ordinary moments have considered herself impregnable against, a temptation to seize Ronald and go back, back on their tracks as fast as ever they could, to the comparative safety of the cave, leaving the brunt of the responsibility for whatever might happen on Marjoram. She wondered what Ronald was feeling, and tried him by a side question.

"Supposing Fah Sien does not return?"

"Then we must go on and find out what has happened to him." He spoke with a thrill of excitement in his voice, but quite firmly. Diana was assured that he was not suffering as she was. She, the hunter of many experiences, more than twice his age, to suffer from nervousness more than this tyro?

Why was it?

Was it because he was a man? Because of his youth, or because he lacked imagination?

"Don't you think so?" Ronald asked.

"What! Go on? How long has he been gone? Yes, it must be half an hour. Perhaps it would be best."

She allowed him to lead her forward.

As to the track there could be no difficulty, for there was only one, banked on each side by thickets difficult to press through. They had not passed on by it ten minutes when a weird haunting cry rose in the stillness; it had a peculiar quality of tone that neither of them recognised; it embodied a strange

piercing terror that was human rather than animal. Diana gripped her son's arm, and her heart nearly stopped, as the awful remembrance of what she had read of Chinese methods rose up before her. Could that unrecognisable cry proceed from Mark in agony? She brushed the idea aside. Never could he or would he have howled like that in any extremity whatever! And as the wail rose again in its anguished despair, something in it struck her as akin to that great boom of sound she and Mark had heard by the river, and her breath came more freely. She moistened her dry lips. Ronald pulled the water-bottle round and made her drink.

"Do you *think*, do you *think* it is an animal?" he asked in an awe-struck voice.

The wails rose again, more faintly, further away, and in them was now a weird sweetness, a touch of resignation, as if emanating from one almost over the gulf of pain sinking into nirvana. There was nothing for it but to go forward. They could not stand indefinitely in that black creeper-bound alley.

And they had not moved for long before they cleared it, and came out into what might have been an apple-orchard in England. At least that is what it looked like in that light. The trees were very small, and gnarled and twisted after the manner of apple-trees; their foliage was scanty, and it was a mere lace-work made by the shadows of twigs that the moon threw earthwards. In between the trees were bright unshadowed patches, for the glade was open, not overtopped by that almost continuous canopy of the upreared heads of giant trees.

Clinging together like children, Diana and her son advanced; then suddenly, with one accord, they stopped, for something had flapped in the midst of one of the crystal patches. Diana recognised it first with trained eyes.

"Fah Sien," she cried, and her great heart rising to the exclusion of all fear, she ran forward and dropped on her knees beside the faintly moving bundle.

It was indeed Fah Sien, mutilated in so ghastly a manner, by the gash of some terrible weapon, that Diana saw his case was hopeless. But her strong heart yearning over the faithful servant, who had gone into danger in her service, drove away all the spasm of horror which would naturally have arisen at the awful spectacle.

"Don't look, Ron," she said, and threw the end of the Chinaman's fluttering garment across the appalling mass. No one but a man of his race could have survived such an injury a minute. Fah Sien's large face had lost its ruddiness, and appeared a putty-coloured mass, with codfish glazed eyes, as it lay upturned, but his senses knew and recognised his "Lady."

"Fah Sien," she wailed, "good brave boy! Lady crying for you. Who done this dreadful thing to you?"

For one moment intelligence came fleeting back over his homely features, and he said, with an unearthly smile like the radiance of the moon itself:

"Must be no old body, not now, no ever." A slight shiver, and he had got rid of that "old body," and passed into the eternity, which even he had

glimpsed in the moment that his soul poised for flight.

Diana stood up. Far in the distance still sounded the musical wail.

"I know what it is now," she said firmly and coherently, having herself fully in control again. "One note rang right down into some dim memory. It is a two-stringed fiddle, a weird thing made with a snake skin over a box. Not the least like ours. The man who killed Fah Sien is one of Min King's followers; if we follow where he leads he will bring us to Mark Carstairs."

She stood to say a mute good-bye to her faithful servant. Then stooped down and picked up a curious red card, or series of cards attached together, which had been lying on the body. She recalled instantly just such another red card, which Mark Carstairs had showed to Fah Sien, and which the dead man had explained was a death-warrant. They were in the habit then, this awful gang, of making out these warrants for those they marked down for murder!

Not if she could help it should Mark's be carried out. She folded the card and put it into the front of her dress.

The wail of the two-stringed fiddle sounded more faintly, and she caught at Ronald.

"Come," she said, and they passed swiftly onward into danger.

For a long time it seemed they slipped and stumbled hopelessly until they got beneath the blackness of a dense mass of trees that shut out all glimmer of moonlight.

Ronald stopped. "We are only going back where we were," he said.

"But the fiddle; it leads onwards——"

"It has stopped."

"I heard it there ahead a second ago."

They stood holding hands, and listened; the silence was absolute.

There was not even the flutter of a wing. The shrilling of insects, to which their ears had been attuned in the lower moister ground, made the dead silence here seem momentous, menacing, solid. Step by step they moved forward, because there was nothing else to do.

"My feet are in a tangled mass of stalks and creepers, not on the ground," said Diana, at last, in an awed whisper.

"I felt that too, it's like an elastic mattress," Ronald agreed, giggling a little.

The adventure was so far removed from any possible experience either of them had ever had, that they had no sensation with which to meet it.

"Here's a light," Diana said, at last, "the moonlight; there must be a break in the trees." But there was none.

Beneath the impenetrable ceiling of overlapping boughs, which held the black darkness as a cistern holds water, there was some mysterious light, light of a strange quality. There was no focus from which it radiated; it seemed to shine up from the ground beneath, spreading fanwise upward. Such a light as sometimes spreads from a decaying fungus. A very faint, plaintive note of the fiddle stole out on their

strained ears, but it seemed to come from below their feet. Diana gripped Ronald's hand hard and spoke low in his ear.

"We are on the roof of their world," she said; "tread softly."

They crept onward, their eyes downwards, seeing the light brighten as they advanced, and at last, with one accord, they dropped to their knees, and began crawling over the thick roof of matted creeper which extended from the hillside slantwise so gradually, that they had not known when they first set foot on it. And as they crawled, with the utmost caution, they heard a human voice speaking, and, though the words could not be distinguished, they knew instantly by the tone that it was Marjoram's. It seemed to come from immediately underneath them, from some hollow whence also the light filtered upward. Lying down full length they began to dig here and there at the tangled mass on which they lay without effect, until Ronald pointed silently to a brighter place from which a column of light almost funnel-like arose. They worked their way to it sinuously; the matting creeper giving and swaying beneath them, for it was too moist and full of sap to crackle.

At length they reached the hole from whence the funnel of light issued, and, heads touching, peered in. Beneath, immediately beneath, so that they could have dropped a pebble on his head, at about the height of an ordinary room, was Marjoram. His dark crisp hair, slightly outlined in grey threads, was uncovered. On both sides of the open space where he sat was a primitive lamp made of some sort of a

wick floating in a clay receptacle of oil. In front of him was a great boulder, which at some far distant date had crashed down the hillside and been brought to a stoppage here. The snaky, tangled creeper growing rapidly downwards had, on meeting this, swung forward, leaving a clear space in front of it, and thus formed a sort of grotto, afterwards continuing its journey downwards to the ground in front and far beyond. Some sort of a tunnel must have been cut through it from the low end, giving access to this singular hiding-place, which, but for the filtering of the light, could never have been discovered.

In falling, the rectangular boulder had split, and one piece lay broken off at a lower level inside the grotto. The angle formed between the two had been filled in with boughs and dried grass, and on it lay a little shrunken figure, so small, so waxen, that it resembled one of the little wax images to be found in Catholic churches. Diana and Ronald had never seen Min King, but it did not take them many seconds to recognise him in this bloodless mummy. He was covered with a gorgeous robe, and the rich tomato-red, decorated with gold thread dragons and lurid birds and fishes, splashed with bizarre effect on the rude surroundings. His small pinched white face, surmounted by a little cap, appeared at one end.

For the moment they thought him a corpse, but as Marjoram continued talking to him in low tones, Min King's eyes moved sideways toward him, back and forth, back and forth, as if worked by the click of machinery. One thin slender waxen hand, with claw-like nails, hung out beneath the coverlet, and

the fingers made a feeble spasmodic movement now and then.

The man with the fiddle was not at first visible, but he must have been creeping up the tunnel, now and then touching his bow, perhaps inadvertently, for he presently came into sight, and squatted near the head of the Chinaman. He held in his hand the odd instrument from which he never ceased to draw forth tiny sounds, subdued and wailing, a very dirge of agony in miniature. His instrument was nothing like a fiddle as Westerners know it. The notes were so faint they formed no hindrance to conversation, but made a sort of accompaniment or recitative. They could not have been overheard fifty yards away. There were obviously other men crouched or squatting out of sight where the grotto roof fell lower, for Marjoram turned to them with a remark now and again. The words he used were Chinese.

But presently he gave an order, and there was movement and commotion to which the fiddle responded automatically, the partly muted strings becoming filled with hurried short notes. The Chinaman who held it had a dull opaque face and intense black eyes, but evidently his soul was in his instrument, and he expressed his emotion through it, hardly knowing he did so.

Marjoram was facing someone who was unseen, and with a leap of the blood the two listeners above heard him speaking slowly in English.

" It is due to Min King that you have been rescued," he said sternly.

Diana's heart seemed as if it would jump right out of her mouth; for the moment she could see or hear nothing. A dizziness seized her, her ears roared, her eyes were blinded, she clutched Ronald's hand in a grip that showed she felt by it alone she held on to a material universe, for the fact that Marjoram was speaking, could only be speaking, to Mark Carstairs, was obvious. As sight and hearing cleared, she longed intensely to shift her position round the aperture so that she might have a chance of seeing Mark, but prudence warned her it might be fatal. Any noise would be heard; the swaying mattress on which they lay might give way and send them headlong down. So instead she strained her ears for the sound of Mark's voice. But there was no answer to Marjoram's remark. He struck a match on a stone by his boot, lit a cigarette, and went on evenly:

"But for him and his extraordinary ascendancy over these followers of his, you might still be a prisoner in the hands of the wild hill-tribes. These men rescued you with superhuman cunning, and have carried you through many miles of jungle to bring you here."

At length Mark spoke:

"If that is so, why am I still bound?"

His voice was so hoarse and faint that it was with difficulty to be recognised as his.

Diana's and Ronald's hands interlocked more tightly.

"That is a small matter," said Marjoram carelessly. "We are quite willing to release you and carry you with us back to civilisation when we go."

"There can be no conditions," said Mark hoarsely, "for Min King has already stolen from me all that you want."

"Any accusation of that kind you may choose to make it is impossible to resent," said Marjoram easily, "for you accuse a dying man unable to defend himself."

"He has brought it on himself," said Mark, in a low deep tone, "when he undertook to work in the service of a blackguard like you."

"And why am I a blackguard?"

"Surely it is time to own up! There was one thing and one thing only you wished to rob me of. I see now the whole plot was designed. I was sent off into the jungle to be an easier prey; the Chinaman was your tool, so that in case of any crime being discovered it might be dropped on his shoulders. Well, he has succeeded, at the cost of his life, if he is really dying, and you hold what you sent him to get from me. Having got it, why do you keep me still bound?"

His voice trailed away in utter exhaustion at the end.

Marjoram flicked the ash off his cigarette.

"As you ask me, I will tell you," he said. "You are the victim of an hallucination. It is not safe to let you free, obsessed by your own idea. You might attack my friend Min King or even me."

"You pretend you think me mad?"

"Lunatics never realise their own condition. I am sorry, but for the present, for your own safety and for ours, it is necessary you should be under restraint."

He got up as he finished speaking, stepped forward to Min King, and kneeling by him took the long, bloodless hand in his own. Diana gave an involuntary

shudder. But the next moment she was lost in amazement, for she heard what she had never expected to hear in Marjoram's voice, a note which sounded like genuine tenderness.

"Little father," he said in English, "you will recover! I spoke so to that cur in the bitterness of my heart, but we will carry you hence, and in time, though you may never walk again, you will recover your strength and mental vigour, and be to me what you have long been, my confidant, my friend and adviser, the one on whom I lean and to whom I turn in this hard, cold world."

He bowed his dark head against the breast covered with the gorgeous dragons, so that his face was hidden. In moving he revealed again the face of the Chinaman, which had been concealed as he knelt beside him.

A strange radiance shone on Min King's clay-coloured face, it was as if a light was shining from inside an alabaster vase.

"My son," he said in English, and his claw-like hand crept to Marjoram's sleeve and rested on his shoulder, "son of my adoption, you will be to me a son?"

"Truly," said Marjoram, raising his head and looking at him.

"You will adopt the rites and religion of our ancestors and make for me the sacrifices and offerings in my country?"

"I will."

"You will, when opportunity comes, carry my bones hence and lay them to rest with my fathers?"

"I will. But you are not going to die. You must

go hence out of this damp black hole, into the light and air. We must make our way at once, urgently, down the river, so that we can get a first-class surgeon. The ride will not hurt you. Surgeons do marvels nowadays. He will remove this bullet, which has lodged near your spine, and you will walk again, my father! But there is no time to lose! To-night there is a moon, and we can travel by its light; your men can carry you lying flat, as they carried you here when they had rescued you from the Chins; by to-morrow evening we will be at Alonzat."

He stood up and gave orders; there was bustling and crackling below, and out of it all came Carstairs' voice, scornful and contemptuous, though so pitiably weak:

"After that comic opera scene we have just witnessed, you cannot deny me a show. It seems we are all lunatics together, and none can fear the other."

Marjoram turned on him, very white. "You——" he said, in tones of fury. "You may stay and rot! I have done with you!"

"In other words, having robbed me of my secret, you and the Chinaman are going to share the swag together."

Marjoram swung back upon him in the act of pointing out some things to be taken by the coolies.

"So long as you talk like that I tell you plainly there is no hope for you," he said.

"I am beginning to understand," said Carstairs. "So long as you know my intention is to denounce you and your confederate, you will leave me here to starve."

"You have grasped the idea, it seems," said Marjoram, "so what need of further words?"

"Supposing my life was so precious to me that I decided to buy it, on your terms?" Carstairs asked.

Marjoram glanced at Min King, and said something in Chinese. Then he replied:

"We should require you to write out a paper to the effect that you were indebted to us for rescuing you at great personal risk, and that you had presented to us the plan of your invention, which Min King holds, as a—what is the stereotyped phrase?—yes, a slight token of your gratitude."

"But, man, if I did," Carstairs burst out in utter honesty, "it would be worth nothing, extorted by force."

"I leave you to be the judge of that," said Marjoram.

The drama unfolded on this strange stage was almost too much for Diana. She was following every twist and turn of the dialogue, and living in it herself. For with every word the man she loved was, all unconsciously, revealing himself to her as he could never have done of set purpose.

He was playing a man's game against dreadful odds. All alone as he thought himself, completely at Marjoram's mercy, yet defying him and not yielding an inch! Could he hold out? Or would he in the end cry for mercy?

Diana had already seen him amid circumstances to test character, but never in anything so sharp as this.

His silence after Marjoram's last sentence made her heart ring with exultation. She knew exactly what he was feeling; to a man of his nature to have signed

such a paper by the pressure of force would be a shame unutterable, never afterwards would he blazon his cause to the world and seek reparation in publicity.

If he allowed himself so to yield, he would drop out of the life he had known as quickly as a stone dropped into a pool; he would take the first ship to be found at Rangoon port and lose himself in the labyrinth of the Eastern islands. For his self-respect, his belief in himself would be broken beyond repair.

To know this, to know all that hung on the next few seconds of his future and hers, was the very tensity of life stung to the *n*th point. It was, of course, in reality a cardboard farce, for even if he faced the worst he would not be left to strive alone, but he did not know that, and to him it was brutally real. Diana, too, was strong. Not for one instant did she wish him to know help was at hand. Her belief, her trust in him were so strong that she did not doubt he would come through triumphantly and reap the rich reward. She was lifted beyond and above herself into an agony of ecstasy, such as is seldom permitted to the limited human organism.

The pause had been so long that Marjoram had indicated to the men the things they were to take, and they were crawling out of the tunnel. The grotto was cleared except for the motionless fiddler and the still figure beneath the gorgeous robe. At last Carstairs spoke in quite a commonplace tone:

"It's no use even discussing it, Marjoram, for I should never sign such a paper or acknowledge your right to my plan."

A shrill high wail, a shriek of triumph it seemed,

echoed from the fiddle strings, coming in so appropriately that it made them all jump, but the man understood no English, and could have been animated only by the sub-conscious self, for he dropped his broad hand on the strings silencing them shamefacedly.

It took a quarter of an hour before Min King was shuffled on to the hammock contrivance on which he had been brought to the grotto, and longer still before he was finally carried out down the tunnel way. He must have suffered, as the bullet of which Marjoram had spoken as having lodged near his spine, that which had paralysed his lower limbs, was not his only hurt, but with the usual stoicism of his race he showed no sign. The lamps had been left burning, and as the last of the Chinese following Marjoram vanished, Diana spoke very low in Ronald's ear. "We must wait for at least a quarter of an hour, as some of them might come back," she said.

CHAPTER XVI

THE GLADE OF DEATH

MARJORAM had left both lamps alight, and as he crept out of sight Mark collapsed. He was resting against an uncomfortable edge of rock that bent his back. His wrists were knotted together in front, also his knees and ankles. A wave of faintness swept over him now that the rigid self-restraint he had exercised was no longer necessary. Was it wonderful that he was faint? He had been through much in the last two days. After the Chins had exploded their antique weapons in the direction of the shadowy Chinese who had rushed in and carried off their master, Min King, they had taken no more trouble to follow them up. But they had picked up their most important capture, Carstairs, and dumped him down inside the stockade. For the Chinaman they did not care a rap; they had shot at him and thrown him out like a dead dog, but an Englishman was different. They were somewhat in the position of a spider who finds a wasp in his web. They were extremely proud of their achievement, and had they been quite free to act would have greatly enjoyed playing, after their fashion, with this captive. But they knew from experience that Englishmen, like wasps, were apt to

have stings in their tails, and they thought it advisable to carry their prize, unhurt as far as might be, to the head of their tribe.

After Mark had lain all night in a semi-conscious state, they had cut him loose and intimated they wished him to go on his own two legs. Finding he could not stand they enjoyed themselves immensely by putting him up on end and seeing him tumble down again, while he cursed them with every likely word he could think of. But time pressed, and finding he really was incapable of walking, they set to work to massage him roughly, an agonising process to the victim, but effective. Then they gave him water to drink, for which he had asked repeatedly, and a filthy, half-raw mess of millet.

He had been made to walk with them further into the fastnesses of the hills, where their own village lay, and all that day he had been pricked on at the point of a dah. When evening came they had arrived at their goal and exhibited their captive triumphantly, after which they had flung him, unbound, into a rickety hut. He had fully determined to achieve escape when the village quieted down, but before he could do so, four of Min King's men, under the leadership of the ghostly fiddler, had rescued him against his will, or perhaps more correctly, recaptured him for themselves. They tied his wrists, knees and ankles, and passing a bamboo pole through the loops of living flesh and bone, had swung him on their shoulders and trotted downhill, going with incredible swiftness.

Before them Mark would not cry out or even curse. Thus he had been brought to the grotto and had lain

there without food or drink since. There were several bamboo jars of water standing about, but he could not bring himself to ask water of Marjoram, it was too much like asking mercy.

When he was left alone he made an attempt to reach one of the upright bamboos, but fell over and collapsed.

After a few minutes Marjoram returned. He threw a handful of damp soil that he had brought with him on to one of the lamps, choking it.

"Daren't leave the lamps alight," he remarked, in a matter-of-fact tone, as if he were saying, "Don't let the fire out." "Might be a conflagration. By Jove though, it would not matter if there were, would it? I'll leave you the other."

He looked curiously at Mark's white face.

"Shamming?" he asked, and bending over pushed up the closed eyelid. Mark wrenched himself away feebly with a "damn you."

"You needn't be so annoyed; I was giving you a last chance. Are you sure you know your own mind?"

Mark did not answer, the only answer would have been a repetition of the curse, and with his ebbing strength he did not feel he could put enough force into it to make it sound anything but ridiculous.

"Very well, on your own head be it," and with this benediction Marjoram departed once more.

Mark, slipping into that unconsciousness which for a while at all events would dull his pain, heard vaguely from the air his own name in Diana's voice, full of a heavenly tenderness. It was an exquisite moment,

not that he supposed she was near, but that the illusion was so satisfying it transported him from hell to heaven. Still he did not answer.

Then he heard her speaking again, with a ring of fear in her tone, and this time amazedly he replied:

"Darling, so you've gone over—I wish I'd known, I shouldn't have minded then, I'm glad, I'm coming as soon as I can."

Tears filled Diana's eyes, and she could not speak; when she had cleared her voice she tried to put a laugh into it, but it was a broken sort of a laugh.

"Mark, dearest, I'm not dead, and you're not going to be! We're here near you, Ron and I, and we've come to rescue you."

At that he stirred a little and roused himself. "Diana? Are you there, or am I light-headed? Come near me so that I can see you."

"I will. Only I'm on the roof, and it isn't the easiest matter in the world to get down. We're here, Ron and I, above you; can you move?"

"Devil a bit," said Mark emphatically.

"We must manage it somehow. For we'll never find the mouth of the tunnel in the dark."

Ronald had got out his knife and was vigorously cutting at the tough creepers.

"I mustn't let us in too suddenly," he said. "One of us will have to go first."

Diana laughed a little hysterically. "Isn't that obvious?"

It was she who went first in the end, after an agony of effort, and torn, dusty, and scratched she landed on the ground. She only paused to catch hold of the

rifle and various effects Ronald slung through to her, before she sprang forward to the corner where Mark lay, while the boy followed her with a thud.

Mark had slipped down and was lying full length on the ground. Diana did not hesitate a second as she looked at his white face and sunken eyes, but snatching up one of the bamboo buckets which she knew held water, she poured a little into his mouth, very slowly at first, as she could not raise his head. She heard Ronald beside her cutting vigorously at the bonds, but her eyes were fixed in an agony on that white face. Then all at once her fingers, pulling open the neck of his shirt, found the little blue ribbon she had left for him, and a spark of agonising joy struck through her.

It was very soon apparent to her experienced eye what was the matter with him. He went off into one faint after another, and though the pain of the returning blood in his numb hands and feet, as they chafed them, brought him round to mutter incoherencies, he lapsed again continually.

"He is starving, dying of exhaustion," Diana said, sympathy wringing her heart. "Oh, for a drop of brandy, or even milk!"

She sopped some of the coarse native bread they had brought with them in water, and tried to make him swallow atoms, but he could not.

"Ron," she said, "he'll die if he doesn't get nourishment! Thank heaven, we brought the rifle! The dawn must be breaking now, though we don't feel it in this pit. I'm off to get some animal, anything, a fox or squirrel, a toad or lizard, to make broth for him."

Ronald nodded. He knew that it was useless to offer to go instead, for he wouldn't have an idea where to find any animal, or much of a chance to kill, if he blundered on one. His must be the woman's part to wait and watch.

"The very first thing I'll do when we're out of this," he said gravely, "is to learn how to kill things."

"It is important, darling, that's why I brought you out so young," said Diana, a little wistfully, as she kissed him. She was very, very tired, fagged out, and had no heart to go searching in the black unknown depths, but needs must. She gave Ronald full directions. He was to keep giving Carstairs sips of water in which the bread had been wrung out, so that there might be some nourishment in it; to massage his feet and hands, and to make up a fire ready for her return. Then, with one backward glance at the haggard white face and blue lips from which the breath scarcely seemed to come, she crawled off down the tunnel. Her thoughts were so busy that it seemed shorter than she expected. They ran thus: To make broth one must have a cooking pot. Diana was an excellent cook, and often admitted it; what was the good of being modest about it? But even she could not make broth with nothing to make it in. She was aware the natives did actually use bamboo for the purpose, but she hadn't learned the knack. The only pot within reach was that Fah Sien had carried over his shoulder, his inseparable companion, and she remembered vividly that he had even taken it with him on his last earthly journey, for Ronald had chaffed him about it

When she finally emerged from the tunnel she found the world still black. By that time she did not disguise from herself what she had to face first, and she would sooner have faced a dozen enraged buffalo. She had to find that awful thing that had once been loyal little Fah Sien, and take from it the pot! It was not a nice idea to take the pot from a dead Chinaman to cook in, but when you come up against the broad facts of life and death niceties do not count.

She had some dim idea of the direction in which she should go, and when a woman is all alight with a spirit of devotion there are very few things she cannot do. Somehow she found herself in that awful glade of death where the stems of the small trees were beginning to be visible.

She had slipped, and stumbled, and scratched, and torn herself before she got there, and once or twice came near to spraining her ankle, an idea that turned her cold with terror, and now she was in the glade, and saw something move swiftly before her. It was something small and furtive, and she did not fire, knowing it must be some animal of prey, and even to save Mark's life she could not make him broth of a carrion-eater which had feasted on That! When she was very sure she was near the awful place, the perspiration came out of every pore, so that she felt it running down inside her clothes.

She swallowed hard, gave a thought to the strange sensations that beset her, so like those of sea-sickness, and then she knew she had found that she sought. When she actually stood beside it there was nothing

living there, though there had been a moment or two before, jackals perhaps, wild dogs or cats maybe, even a leopard, or His Majesty the tiger, who does not always disdain carrion.

The Thing seemed strangely spread, and the light was so dim! Oh, for a torch! But after turning aside to get rid of the horrible infirmity that beset her, she bent over gingerly, trying to realise where the head lay. In spite of all her peering she was forced to touch It, as she dare not waste time, and for the moment in great thankfulness thought her hand had lighted straight upon the round cooking pot, but when she tried to lift it she found it was Fah Sien's round, black-haired head from which the cap had fallen. Shuddering, and compelling her muscles by sheer will-power against their revolt to complete the gruesome task, she passed her hand down the back of the neck, and came right upon the cord to which the cooking pot should be attached. Setting her teeth and shutting her eyes she drew out her clasp-knife and severed the cord, and, pulling it up in nervous jerks, felt the iron pot with its swing-handle. Seizing it, she sprang to her feet, hastening away until she was far from the glade. Then she leaned against a tree trunk and gradually regained steadiness. She had much to be thankful for. The merciful darkness for one thing, which had veiled the worst from her eyes, though not from her imagination. She knotted the cord and swung the pot over her head, then her beating heart gradually quieting down took note of her bearings in this comparatively open space, from which she could judge whence the dawn would come.

She climbed upward and away, selecting her ground with care, and posted herself near a ravine whence she could see without being seen. Pray God some animal hastening home to his lair after his morning feed might come that way!

The dawn flooded the sky. The sun himself was abroad, though not in sight, and between the trees one could see the rosy flush turn to pale and then to deeper blue. She knew that for her any tracking was out of the question, she had neither the strength nor the time. Even now as she lay, physically resting but with every sense alert, Mark might be passing over the Great Divide.

"Must be no old body, not now, no ever."

Strange words! How would they meet, those two, if fate sent them fleeting out within a few hours of time and a few miles of space together? Would Fah Sien be Chinese still? It was an unthinkable tangle. Would they recognise each other, those two men who, so differently, had loved her? She knew now, beyond question, Mark loved her; she had known it before she kissed him, but whether, if he survived, he could be induced to declare it, was another question. Better, of course, if he could, still that was a small matter. If he survived, and still hung on to his absurd ideas, she would have to do it for him. Diana had no qualms about this; that this was the best thing she had ever had a chance of she was quite sure by now. She was far too sensible to let the best thing in her life slip for the want of a little plain speaking. Well, hardly plain-speaking; that wouldn't do! A few words, say, which would leave Mark under the impres-

sion he had done it himself! She smiled a little, then all at once her hunter's instinct gripped her, and Mark and the future were forgotten, while sight and hearing and brain were concentrated on the matter of the moment. For she felt a movement, and saw looking toward her down the ravine a little man not more than four feet high, with an orange vest and dark coat. As she made the slightest movement he dropped, and she recognised in that instant it was no man, but a Malayan bear. It was a long shot and an awkward one, for he was retreating swiftly, his brown back toning in with the big stones amid which he moved; but it was her chance, and she had no time to aim carefully. Like lightning, trusting to instinct, she fired, and saw him roll over, but spring up and hasten on.

She tore along the top of the ravine, dashing between trees and over obstacles; saw him scurrying round a turn in the ravine, and fired again. Re-loading as she ran, she flew onward, plunged down into the ravine at the bend where it branched, and found nothing. Examining the trail she saw heavy blood-marks, and, panting with exertion and excitement, hurried forward. Round the angle of a huge rock she came on him suddenly, seated on the ground, holding his paws over his middle, and swaying backwards and forwards like a child with the stomach-ache. He looked up at her and snarled, obviously unable to move. Her heart melted in her. It was like killing a child. But it must be done, and she steeled herself. His life for Mark's! Firing close enough to make the shot certain, she sped a bullet

through his head. He was quite a young thing, and, throwing herself on him, she dragged him to a clearer space, and began the hateful task commonly left to the servants.

She had done this kind of job before, however, though not for a very long time, and she vowed she never would again, as she ripped the skin with her long clasp knife, and laid bare the side, from which she cut off as much as she could carry of the best part. She had no time to skin him completely, but stripping off a section of the skin rolled her meat in it and set off.

It was full morning before she finished. The air had begun to be warm even here, when much exertion was demanded, and as she humped down the ravine she felt her mind fly back to the dim grotto, with death hovering overhead. During the passage of the chase and the kill, and in the time of "dividing the spoil," she had had no room for thought of anything but that on which her mind was set.

Once or twice as she was going back she had to pause to make sure of her bearings, and once an awful dread of having lost the way possessed her, nearly dazing her with fear. But at last she recognised the glade from which she had started, and, carefully refusing to look at the ghastly havoc of the night-marauders, she started afresh to find the rest of the route. She struck the mouth of the tunnel more easily than she had imagined she would, having taken the precaution of tying a strip from her handkerchief to it. Then she crept upwards, heavily laden, on hands and knees into an awful stillness. It

was so still that her heart misgave her. Had Marjoram returned and carried them both away?

"Ron," she cried. There was no answer, only a movement inside, then Ronald's figure blocked the hole. "Ssh," he said, "he's sleeping."

"Really sleeping; not dead?" she asked, as she rolled the heavy load off her aching shoulder and straightened her limbs.

The light had burnt out and the daylight that penetrated was very dim, but enough to show outlines. Diana crept over and felt the pulse of the sleeper, and laid her hand lightly on his temples.

"We shall save him!" she said thankfully.

CHAPTER XVII

"HOW MUCH DOES IT MEAN TO YOU?"

THAT same afternoon, about four o'clock, Diana stood over the patient with an enamel cup of bear's broth.

"It's very good," she said encouragingly. "You know you liked the last. It went to your head, and you've been asleep ever since."

Mark sat up and looked at her, then drank the full cup off at once, hot as it was.

The light was dim, for, owing to the suffocating heat in that confined space, they had been obliged to let the fire down to ashes, and the oil for the lamp had run out. Yet Diana could see enough in her patient's manner and action to bring a sudden lump to her throat and the tears to her eyes.

How nearly she had lost him!

"Now," she said, when she was able to speak, "we want to hear all about it, Ron and I. What about those jungle fowl you shot when we left you?"

"I'd give the world for a smoke," Mark said unexpectedly.

Ronald gave an odd little laugh, and, kicking the fire into a glow, produced three tired looking cigarettes in a wax vesta box.

"He gave them to me, Marjoram," he explained.

" And I really don't want them ; take them all, Mark."

" Princely generosity," commented Mark, leaning back again and drawing in the aroma. " I've nothing to tell. It's your tale I want to hear."

" Very well," agreed Diana, " that will give you time for digestion nicely ; a starved man should be careful."

Ronald meantime fed the flame judiciously with tiny twigs from a heap he had collected so as to keep up a continuous glow without making too much heat. The firelight played on Mark's white face as he sat with his head against a projecting bit of stone, and his eyes were fixed on Diana as she leaned a little forward, chin in hand.

She told him very briefly of their return down the ridge, of Marjoram's appearance, and her suspicions. She went on to their midnight flitting. Then, getting more absorbed, she spoke of Fah Sien's tragic end with tears in her voice. But of the red card she did not speak ; Diana had in unusual measure the gift of her sex, intuition. When she had finished, even down to the slaying of the little human bear with his broad orange collar, there was a silence.

" Now it's your turn," she commented expressively, and, glancing up suddenly, looked away again, as with a little electric shock she met the intent gaze of Mark's dark eyes, which had never moved from her face.

He was thinking how extraordinary she was ! How utterly and amazingly satisfying ! How—he could not find another word but pungent—yet pungent was

hardly it, it was pungent of the most gratifying, interesting, glorious kind. The mere neighbourhood of Diana would bring back a man from half over the Divide!

In spite of all her escapades that morning she had in some miraculous way made herself neat, dainty, and wholesome again. Her fair hair stood out in the leaping flames in gilt threads like an aureole, and yet it was quite well arranged and not wild. It was as if each little thread shone with an electric current of its own. Her features in profile were irregular, but so piquant, and Dianaish! When she spoke, Mark shook himself together; how he longed to tell her all this instead of his own banal doings, but it was impossible. He was more moved by her wonderful personality, her capability, by all she had suffered and done, than he had been moved by anything for years. He felt full to the brim of feeling. He who had so rigorously suppressed feeling and emotion in himself; shut it up in a locked box, that he had grown content to believe he could never suffer from that delicious pain called love.

"Well," said Diana, "we're waiting!"

He made a plunge and spoke baldly, abruptly.

"They got me," he said, "crawled up behind while I lay commanding the path. Chucked me off. Carried me away, I suppose. I was insensible from a bang on the head. We spent the night at an open camp on the hillside. Next day I was made to march; they went fast too. That night the old Chinese devil's men came on to the scene and picked me out. That chap who plays the fiddle and four others. He's Min King's

familiar. How they did it I don't know! There's much one can't understand about these Orientals. I'm inclined to think they hypnotise men when they want to. They lifted me clean through the Chins, who were supposed to be sentries, while they stood like men asleep."

He didn't speak continuously, but in short sentences with pauses between.

As he stopped, Ronald asked:

" Were you all trussed up? "

" No, not then. I could have got out of that. I meant to have a try, but they arrived first. It was they, the Chinese devils, who tied me hand and foot when they got me clear away. They carried me on their shoulders that way."

" And had you nothing to eat? " Diana asked.

" Not a scrap except some filthy millet the first morning. I had made signs, and explained as well as I could that I wanted something, but the Chins took no notice. I had a drink on the way up."

" But didn't they chase you, finding you gone? "

It was Ronald who spoke this time, breathless with the excitement of the live adventures he was living in the heart of.

" I don't know, but if they had they must have caught us up. Four men carrying another can't go fast, though now I think of it they did wonders. I think myself the hill-men were glad to be quit of me. These tribes have had a pretty good lesson as to the dangers of meddling with an Englishman. I take it it was a kind of accident altogether. They didn't know who I was until they got me. If there had been

a big man amongst them then they might have left me alone at once as too dangerous to hold. The not feeding me was, I suppose, a mere accident due to insensibility. By this time they're probably praying their gods the British don't come and eat them all up, and are making arrangements not to be at home if that call comes off."

There was a long silence. At last Ronald moved. "I'll have to get some more firing for the night," he explained. "This burns so fast," and he made as if to crawl into the tunnel.

"Don't go far outside," said Diana. "There can't be much light there now."

"Just far enough to get an appetite for the next bit of bear-steak," rejoined Ronald, as he disappeared.

There was an embarrassed silence when he left. Diana took up his task, daintily selecting and throwing on to the fire small fragments and twigs; she was determined not to speak first, and she knew the agony Mark was going through now he was alone with her. Words did not come easily to him.

"Diana," he said, at last, and made a movement.

She turned toward him and gave him one mischievous glance, but did not help him out.

"I don't know how in the world I'm ever going to thank you for all you've done," he began commonplacely.

"Oh; is that all?"

"It isn't all, it isn't even the beginning," said Mark, with difficulty, "but it's all I can say."

"Why?"

"Because I'm a hopeless, broken-down ass. Just

now for this moment I have you here, just you and me together, and it's all the world, but it won't last. By to-morrow, a few seconds it will seem, we'll move, we'll get back to the world——"

" And then ? "

" Then I'll have to start all over again. I don't know how ; I can't tell what will happen when Marjoram and I meet. Perhaps I'll kill him, then it will be finished."

" And what do you suppose I'm going to do ? "

" You ? Oh, you'll be all right. You'll go back to England, none the worse, I hope, for having been dragged into my miserable affairs. In time, perhaps, you'll even look back on it and say, ' I wouldn't have missed it,' when you've forgotten all the hardship and suffering."

" Supposing I don't want to forget it ? "

" *I* can't ever forget it, as from first to last it's been my fault. If you'd never known me you'd never have been through all this."

" Then I'd have missed the greatest thing in my life," said Diana. She couldn't carry out the game as it should be played, it was too vital. And there was something so pathetic about him. He was all wistful now, the stubbornness had died away. She left off tending the fire and sat down near to him, facing him, her back against the stone. " Mark, it's no use pretending. We've got to have this out. How much does it mean to you ? "

His head bent lower so she could not see his face, only the straight dark hair, growing longer than he usually wore it, and at last he said in a voice so charged

with feeling and pain and emotion it was hardly audible:

"It means *everything!* All I have ever thought or felt or known is nothing, beside you, Diana!"

She put her hand on his bowed head and he caught it in his own, and drew it passionately to his mouth, her little hard, work-stained, jungle-soiled hand, and kissed it hotly and hungrily, so that she felt the kisses burning through the skin. Diana's own voice was not quite steady; she crept nearer, and her other arm stole over his bowed shoulders. "But, Mark dear, if we feel like that, what else matters?"

He let her hand go and put both his own over his face.

"It's no good. I can't," he said. He expressed no surprise at hearing how it was with her, seemingly he had known or divined that. "Just now we've been thrown together. You've done things—oh, unutterable things—for me, that makes you love me; it's the way with women, grand women like you with deep hearts. But once you're back in your own world all that will vanish. I've nothing to offer you. If I were rich, and could afford to keep you in comfort, to let you travel wherever you would, that would be different. If I were rich——"

"*I* am," said Diana softly.

As he made no comment she went on, playing teasingly with the hair above his ears:

"I told you once how much truth there was in that nice story of little Mrs. Fyfe's. She got it all wrong. As you know, old Mr. Forbes of Loch Eyre was my father-in-law. My husband was his eldest son, and

for a long time the only one. When we came back to Scotland, after his death, old Mr. Forbes liked us very much indeed. He had married again by that time, and had one more son, Ned, Ron's uncle, though only about the same age. When Mr. Forbes died he left all he had in two equal parts, one to Ned, with which his mother has nothing to do ; that speaks volumes for the success of his second marriage, doesn't it ? And the other to me in trust for Ronald. That is to say, I am to use the income for us both, entirely as I think best, but the capital must eventually come to him. The difference of the conditions underlined his opinion of me and the other Mrs. Forbes, and she and I are naturally ' not on calling terms.' "

Diana gave her quaint little chuckle. " But what I have is ample for the three of us, Mark, for you and me and Ron. It comes to somewhere about £3,000 a year."

He caught and imprisoned one of her warm firm hands again, and held it against his knee.

" That makes it worse ; that's final," he said, with decision.

" Don't you think you could give me a kiss ? " Diana asked. Then mischievously, " You never refused me before."

He took her face in both his hands and brought it near his own, then as their lips met his arms enfolded her, and he held her closely there in the faint glimmer of the fire.

She released herself presently.

" Diana, darling, darling ! " he whispered hoarsely.

" I suppose," she said, with her little chuckle, " it's the settlements you're worrying about."

He made a sound of assent.

" If you still had that priceless plan, you wouldn't mind so much ? "

Even in his moment of emotion his mind sprang back readily to the precious plan.

" That is gone," he said ; " the damned Chinaman stole it. I can never get it again."

" If you had it, would you still say our marriage was impossible ? "

He hesitated. " Not so impossible," he conceded, at last. Then considering. " You see after this I'm free of Marjoram ; he could not hold me to that contract, even he. If I had still held the plan I would have disregarded him, defied him entirely ; he would not have dared to interfere in face of the story I had to tell. Then I might have realised from the sale of the patent enough money to start in a business of my own."

Diana purred with satisfaction. " If you're lying politely to save my feelings, Mark, you've done for yourself," she said, " for here is the blessed plan that is going to work this miracle."

She thrust before his eyes the red packet of cards she had drawn from the bosom of her blouse.

As he fingered it in bewilderment she freed herself to throw fresh fuel on the fire. Mark fell on his knees before the blaze, his hands nervously twitching, his face aglow.

" But it is ! " he exclaimed, all his subdued despair vanishing. " By all that's marvellous ! How did you get it, Diana ? "

She told him.

" It came into my mind just while we were talking that that was what it was," she said conclusively.

" But you never examined it ! "

" A woman doesn't need to, she knows some things."

" Min King must have given it to the fiddler for safe keeping," said Mark. " Possibly he had others also ; it may be a custom of theirs to carry some of these dandy death-warrants about to scatter on the victims who have displeased them, just to give a finish to the business, and in the dark even the cat-eyed fiddler made a mistake and decorated Fah Sien with the wrong order."

" I shall never be able to think of Fah Sien without a pain at my heart."

" Poor Fah Sien ! Those devils must have known he revealed Ronald's hiding place ; they had marked him out since then."

But Diana had no intention of letting the conversation stray to side-issues, especially when Ronald might return any moment.

" Then you withdraw your refusal of my offer ? " she asked, kneeling in front of him, her head a little on one side.

Mark put his arm round her very gently.

" You don't know in the least what you're letting yourself in for," he said gravely.

" Tell me."

" You've seen me here only in exceptional circumstances ; if you lived day by day with me you'd find out I'm not good-tempered ; there are days together when I don't want to speak to anyone."

"That would suit me very well," she answered, pressing her face into his shoulder.

"Then I'm not a society man, I'm jungle; I'll have to go off alone at times. The idea of all your friends terrifies me."

"There aren't so many, and I rather think you'd like some of them."

"There is a lot more; but, to put it short, I'm not one quarter good enough for you."

"But you see, I love you."

As he did not reply, she went on urgently:

"Don't you believe it?"

"How can I?"

"Didn't you believe it even when I asked you to kiss me right in the middle of the jungle?"

He laughed a little. "Yes, I knew you did then."

"Why not now, when I've just done it again?"

This time he drew her very, very close, and held her as if he could never let her go; there in the dim firelight the glory of heaven descended upon them. "I'll try to believe it," he said, hoarsely, in her ear.

At that moment Ronald, making quite an unnecessary noise, heralded his approach up the tunnel.

The other two tended the fire simultaneously. But the moment he entered his eyes fell on the red cards.

"By Jove!" he said awestruck. "Is that your plan, Mark?"

"Yes," said Diana, forestalling him, "and he's going to give it to me for a wedding present."

Ronald looked from one to the other rather sheepishly. In spite of his precautions he had not expected anything like this. He was far beyond his years in sense,

but it is difficult for the most broad-minded of children to realise that parents are not out of reach of romance.

" Are you going to live with us, old chap ? " he asked, making sure of his facts as delicately as he could.

Mark looked at Diana.

" Your mother seems to think so," he said smiling.

" What I *think*," Diana said promptly, " is that you really might be allowed a little bear's flesh minced up to-night, your digestion ought to be equal to it. But you must be very careful and have nothing else."

" He can't, because we've eaten all the bread," exclaimed Ronald, who inherited his mother's practical mind.

CHAPTER XVIII

MARK CARSTAIRS SIGNS

It was early when they started the next day, the first day of a new world to Mark and Diana.

She had been anxious to bury Fah Sien before they left, but Mark demurred; he said that the small carrion-feeders of the jungle would have done their part, and beyond that it was not well to look. So they skirted the place, and Fah Sien's bones were left as they lay, dragged hither and thither. But in passing Diana voiced his requiem in his own halting words, " No old body, not now, no ever," for she felt that nothing even in Shakespeare could ever so combine pathos and that vision, which lifts the meanest soul to eternity.

Carstairs' intention was to make for the cave where Marjoram had camped. Whether he were there or not, it must be the objective of their first day's journey. It was highly probable that, anxious as he was to obtain surgical care for the Chinaman, he would have pushed on, but even if not it would be all the better, for Mark was yearning to come in contact with him once more.

He knew the general direction to be followed, but his leading fell far short in adroitness of that of the

dead Chinaman, and many a weary scramble they had in the course of the day, only to find the track chosen impenetrable, and to be beaten back to try another. None of them were in the best of condition, and they found halts frequently necessary.

During one of them, the glorious subject of "What you thought of me" and "What I thought of you" being momentarily in abeyance, Diana and Mark discussed the strange obsession Marjoram had shown in regard to Min King.

"There can be no two opinions about that," Diana declared. "He just adores him; and That One never in his life cared for anyone but himself. It's too funny for words. What can be the link between them?"

"None, I expect," explained Mark. "Sheer caprice. These unaccountable nuggets and streaks are in all men. I'm full of them, but they don't show up so much as I'm ordinary; embedded in a sparkling original like Marjoram they hit you in the eye."

"What shall you say to Marjoram when you meet?" Diana asked.

"Very little, I expect."

"You won't kill him now?"

"No."

"Why not?" she persisted, sparkling down upon him.

Mark was not to be drawn; he looked at her, and that was sufficient answer to make her laugh happily.

So the long day did not seem long, and until they had passed actually down the valley and over the stream, about four o'clock in the afternoon, neither of them worried as to what was to come next. Then,

however, Diana's heart began to throb. She trusted indeed in Mark's self-command, but the provocation had been intense; she knew that underneath Mark's present happiness and well-balanced judgment there lay a basis of stern strength; he did not readily forget, and he did not readily forgive. A fresh insult from Marjoram might make the smouldering fires leap from control and precipitate a conflagration. For the first time in her life Diana was a coward. She wanted to seize Mark and Ronald, and carry them far away from the baleful spirit which had so injured all three of them. It was not her nature to take things lying down, but as she told herself in this case, it was "Love" and not "Conscience" that made a coward of her.

So she gazed with anxiety clutching at her heart, up toward the open space outside the cave, as the heavy foliage thinned and allowed it to come into sight.

Then she stopped, and turned entreatingly to Mark.

"Mark, you see all Marjoram's Chin followers are here still. They seem to have increased. I am afraid for you to meet him here. Couldn't we even now go somewhere else for the night?"

His face was very set and dark, the stubbornness predominant, but his eyes lit with tenderness as he looked at her.

"Would you like me to do that?"

She did not answer that, but promptly interposed another question:

"Will you promise me not to fight whatever That One does or says?"

Mark shook his head.

" I can't promise that. He might insult you."

" Oh, he won't do that. He doesn't care a button about me as a woman ; I have never seen that side of him."

They were moving on upward, her hand grasping the lapel of Mark's coat ; Ronald was a few steps behind, and almost as she spoke they came into the open. There was no movement among the Chins, for they had known of the advance long before, while as yet it was out of sight of untrained eyes, beneath the trees, and they had reported accordingly.

But when the three drew very near, one of the Chins went into the cave, the rest regarding the newcomers with a repellent stare.

A moment later out of the cave came Marjoram, clean and cool-looking in an immaculate suit of uncrushed tussore.

He saluted, and Diana was amazed to see that he held out his hand to her in greeting. She had not expected he would give her such an opportunity.

" *No*, thank you ! " she said with emphasis, withholding her own hand.

He did not seem to mind, his manner was preoccupied, far-away, as if he hardly saw them, and cared very little what they thought and did.

" I am greatly relieved to see you safe," he said, automatically to Diana. " We were on the point of sending an expedition out to look for you."

He ignored Mark as if he had been invisible.

" You have taken time to think it over first evidently," Diana retorted.

He looked at her reproachfully.

"My men told me that you had left here voluntarily; I thought, naturally, you had got tired of waiting and gone on down to Alonzat. It was not until an hour ago, on the arrival of Mr. Forrest, the Political Officer, who came through there on his way up, that I knew it was not so."

"Mr. Forrest here?" Mark exclaimed, surprised into speech by the relief he felt for Diana's sake.

Marjoram favoured him with the stern and searching glance a judge might bestow on a miserable criminal.

"I am thankful to say he is," he replied, "and as he has come just in time to take down the dying deposition of my friend, Min King, I must ask you to excuse me; we will go into your affairs later."

As he disappeared Mark and Diana looked at each other, the same thought in both their minds.

"Deposition? Who knows what that old devil isn't swearing against me? That I murdered Fah Sien or him, maybe! I had better be present," said Mark.

So they passed through between the squatting coolies and military police who had come up with Mr. Forrest. No wonder they had thought Marjoram's following increased.

They saw in the centre of the cave, resting on a board which sloped slightly upward, the curious little waxen figure of the Chinaman still covered with the gorgeous dragon robe. He was smaller and whiter than ever. It seemed as if extinction must come by his vanishing gradually, growing more and more transparent and shrunken until he was invisible.

Around the head of this board, which resembled a bier, were gathered some of his own people, but the fiddler was not among them. That he was present in some dark corner was evident from the delicate wail that now and again punctuated the scene as if with a cry of human anguish. Most of the Chins had been sent outside, but a few grouped themselves in the background. Beside the Chinaman knelt a neatly-groomed authoritative Englishman, with a little black moustache. He had a writing-pad in one hand, and was taking down sentences as they fell faintly through the half-closed bloodless lips of the dying man. Marjoram knelt on the other side, and his long, sinewy brown hand rested on the centre of the dragon on Min King's breast. Somehow this seemed to inspire the Chinaman with some vitality, for when Marjoram, having resumed his position, looked round at the irruption of the new-comers, and, frowning slightly, withdrew it, the feeble stream of words stopped instantly; the official looked up, also annoyed.

Ronald and Mark took off their head-gear, and all three slunk behind Marjoram. On his replacing his hand, Min King began again.

Evidently what he said was audible to Mr. Forrest, for he wrote hurriedly, and, after an interval, asked

"Is that all?"

Answer inaudible to anyone beyond himself.

"I am going to read over to you what I have written."

"Hadn't he better sign it?" Marjoram interjected. "He may be gone before——"

"I must read it over to him," Mr. Forrest ex-

plained primly, "and then his signature must be witnessed."

So he began in a low, clear, precise voice:

"This is the last will and testament of me Min King of San Twei in the province of Pechili China and of Rangoon and Moulmein Burma. I leave all my property real and personal including mills wharves specie stocks loans and valuables to my friend Thomas Cecil Marjoram absolutely to use and devise as seemeth to him best with a request that he will provide as seems good to him for my fiddler Ho Tsien and that he will when opportunity offers carry my bones back to China to be laid in the tombs of my ancestors."

"Now you must sign it," said Mr. Forrest.

But there was no responsive movement on the bier.

The dramatic instinct in Diana impelled her to move forward a little, so that she could see the face of her enemy at this moment when he was being strained on the rack. She had no mercy left in her where this man was concerned, the wrong done to Mark had burnt up any vestige of human tenderness there might have been.

When Marjoram had come outside the cave she had been instantly struck by his chalky whiteness, and the black smudges under his eyes; now he looked positively ghastly, and—for the first time since she had known him—truly hideous. His hair had lost its crisp kink, and was plastered down lank on his head with sweat; it resembled that of his own Chinese boy. Was it true that far back in his ancestry there was a touch of Chinese blood in him? His great eyes seemed to be sunk in blue rims, and his nostrils were

pinched. Diana knew from Mark of the ruin which hung over his firm, and now it seemed probable that he was going to miss a vast fortune by seconds; and, with a little start of surprise, she recognised that if he did, she and Mark would be the cause of it, for if he had not delayed for that few seconds outside, in meeting them, the signature might even now have been recorded.

Marjoram raised his head and looked full at her, and she had no doubt whatever that he knew all that was passing in her mind.

A faint, sardonic smile shone on his strained face, and, still with his eyes on hers in challenge, he deliberately leaned over and pressed his cheek to the clammy forehead of the dying Chinaman.

Diana shuddered so palpably it was not to be overlooked, and the smile on Marjoram's face grew grimmer as he reaped the reward of his action, for Min King's pale eyes opened, his lips fluttered, and the long clawed hand groped feebly for the pen, which Mr. Forrest promptly put into it.

It was just as if Marjoram had seen into Diana's heart and said, "Yes, you think you triumph, but I will do anything to defeat your triumph yet."

He had slipped an arm under the Chinaman's head, and slowly and painfully, in a silence so tense it seemed to hold them all bound in india-rubber, the waxen hand traced the signature in English letters, the English signature on which Min King had always so prided himself.

Mr. Forrest looked straight up at Mark who was standing directly behind Marjoram.

"We shall want your signature as witness, Mr. Carstairs," he said, even as the pen fell from the feeble fingers. "Mr. Marjoram cannot witness as beneficiary. I will be one witness, but there must be two, and you are the only other European present." He ignored Diana.

Diana waited anxiously. She would not by word or look influence Mark's judgment. On him alone for the moment it rested to give or withhold from his bitterest enemy this immense fortune. True, if he refused, one of the Chinamen might be made to give his mark. Mr. Forrest himself might explain the circumstances, and the will be declared valid with only one witness, but all this entailed speculation and uncertainty. It rested with Mark to put, certainly and without question, this astonishing fortune into Marjoram's hand. There was a moment's dead stillness, and in spite of herself at last Diana stole a look at Mark. Then her heart leaped with joy, for he was not looking at her to draw inspiration from her, he was deciding for himself on his course of action, and his decision was the same generous one that hers would have been. He walked round to Mr. Forrest's side and dropped on one knee by him; taking the fountain pen from his hand, he signed where the official finger pointed, and Mr. Forrest signed immediately below.

It was characteristic of Marjoram that he did not acknowledge by word or look that he understood the immensity of the service done him.

He merely said "Thank you," in the same tone he might have used had Mark passed him the salt at table.

Then he turned again to the little Chinaman, and Diana also looked at him and started.

Was it then true? Was he slipping out of sight before their eyes? Or had he only sunk lower beneath the coverlet? He was visibly smaller and thinner.

"He has gone," said Marjoram reverently. "Good-bye, my adopted father. I will burn the joss-sticks for you as I vowed, and pay to your remains all the respect that a son could do."

He rose to his feet, and with a surge the Chinamen from the back swept around the little corpse and an ear-splitting noise arose in which the passionate, agonised notes of the fiddle wrung the very reins of being. Diana made a dive to escape, and found herself standing outside, hands pressing on her ears, close to that type of officialdom, Mr. Forrest.

"I have yet to hear much of your story," he said, politely, to Diana. "And regret it must not be postponed. I have left urgent matters behind which brook no unnecessary delay. Directly the moon is up I shall have to start back for Alonzat. Would you and Mr. Carstairs favour me with a full account of all that happened, immediately, so that I may make notes?"

Diana looked at Mark and left him to answer.

"I regret, Mr. Forrest," he said, with that quiet decision she was beginning to know in him, "that that is impossible. Food and rest are essential. What time do you propose starting to-night?"

"Oh, Mark!" Diana burst in. "Can't we go too?"

"Wouldn't it be too much for you?"

"No, no, there are hours still; it's not six, and Mr. Forrest can't start until ten."

"Eleven," he interposed, with characteristic exactitude.

"Will you allow us to come?" Mark asked, "or shall we hamper you?"

Mr. Forrest was too polite to say "Yes" to the last question, so he had perforce to say "Yes" to the first. He saw it might be difficult for them to be left with the dead Chinaman.

"I must discover from Mr. Marjoram," he added, "what he intends doing, whether he will have the body embalmed by the late Min King's followers, or bury it here and return to fetch the bones later, to carry to China according to the promise he made."

"Mr. Forrest," said Diana, lips and eyes beaming, "Mr. Carstairs and I are engaged to be married. We think we'd better tell you."

But the dry officialdom of Mr. Forrest's manner did not abate.

"Indeed? I congratulate you, Mr. Carstairs. You and Mr. Marjoram both are to be congratulated, he on the acquisition of a handsome fortune, and you of a charming wife."

"Even he can't congratulate you on the 'acquisition of a handsome' wife," whispered Diana irrepressibly, to Mark, as they moved away together.

Ronald, who was feeling rather overlooked, happened to hear it.

"Mother, I think you're beautiful," he exclaimed indignantly.

"So do I, Ron," asserted Mark. "Only when she

says these things she will have it so, there's no answering her."

They found a quiet place where they could rest undisturbed, and having had something to eat, they all three fell asleep.

But Mark's brain was so charged with a sense of what he had yet to do before leaving the neighbourhood that he slept only a couple of hours, and woke with his mind set on his opportunity. Very, very lightly, so as not to disturb the others, he made his way to the cave, and looked in.

Mr. Forrest was sitting by the light of the fire writing on that pad which apparently was never out of his hand except when he ate or slept. Marjoram was reclining on the ground beside him, his head resting on one arm.

Directly Mr. Forrest saw Mark he exclaimed with satisfaction, "Ah, now Mr. Carstairs, perhaps you can give me an hour?"

"Not even yet," answered Mark. And looking down on Marjoram he uttered the one word, "Come." Marjoram rose to his feet like a trained dog and followed him out of the cave.

"See here, Carstairs," he began, catching at Mark's coat sleeve as they went out together.

"Don't touch me," Mark commanded.

"I was only going to say I appreciated the good office you did me over the will," explained Marjoram aggrievedly. "Don't be so huffy, man, there's nothing between us now."

"Nothing—between—us—now!" Mark repeated, sitting down on a low-growing branch out of

earshot of everyone. "And you left me to starve?"

Marjoram gave a short laugh, and lit a cigarette. "Well! You didn't, you see! Very much not."

"I brought you here to tell you one or two things," said Mark; "the first is that but for certain circumstances which have arisen, as you will know in due time, I should have killed you certainly."

Marjoram leaned over a higher branch and blew a cloud of cigarette smoke. "Why not give it—the circumstance—her—a name?" he asked.

"I can only warn you that if *you* do, circumstances or none, you'll be a dead man inside of a minute," responded Mark.

"Oh, you've got a revolver, have you? Mine, I suppose. I'm quite unarmed."

"I'm not here to bandy words with you. I've mentioned my first reason for speaking to you, the second is to give myself the satisfaction of telling you what I think of you; on the evidence I hold, you are convicted of being a thief, a liar, a scoundrel and a murderer." He spoke with an intensity of feeling Marjoram had never known in him before."

"I suppose it might appear so from your point of view," he admitted unconcernedly.

"You will admit then that I have the right to ask you some questions, your own conscience will tell you that."

"Conscience is only a symbol," said Marjoram, in a detached way. "No reality corresponds with it. But I'm astounded, exhilarated, appalled, glorified, thrilled by this mighty thing which has happened to me, in which indeed I am quite ready to admit you

had a hand—the more fool you—so that like those Persian monarchs of old I'll say, 'Ask what thou wilt, even to the half of my kingdom.'"

"My part will be confined to asking, it doesn't extend to taking," commented Carstairs drily, wondering if the man before him were quite sane. "I shall have to sort out my ideas a bit. There is so much I want to know. Wait a while."

Marjoram obediently settled himself down on a carefully selected spot on the ground, and fixing his brilliant eyes on his companion munched a twig with the air of an intelligent child at a viva voce examination.

"Did you send Min King up the Chindwin to extract information from me, or did he come of his own accord?" was Carstairs' first question.

"How can you ask, knowing something of an Oriental? Of course I didn't send him. I told him of your obstinacy and persistent refusal to accord us our rights. A short time after, I heard from him, saying he wished to inspect this land on the Yawtha, and asking if I would give him a note to you to facilitate matters."

"At any rate Min King had nothing to do with appointing me to the MF. Estate," said Carstairs steadily.

"He had."

"He suggested it to you?" he asked in surprise.

"The word suggest is perhaps too strong," answered Marjoram thoughtfully.

"You are Oriental in your own methods."

"I'll have to be, now that I've to play the part

of a son to the old chap," rejoined Marjoram flippantly.

"I presume you know that—your confederate kidnapped Ronald Forbes?" demanded Carstairs, in a tone which showed he was keeping himself in check with difficulty.

"Yes; I heard that the night before last. It was not for me to dictate to Min King as to his procedure."

The effort to hold his temper in leash was harder than Carstairs had foreseen, yet there were things which he must know, so he took a fresh grip of himself and went on:

"Did Min King tell you why he followed us up after we had left the Yawtha Rock?"

"He did not. But I conjecture your getting the better of him on that deal made the old boy angry; no, not angry"—he smiled, "one could not apply such a word to Min King, but whatever took the place of it in his psychology, let us say acridly malevolent."

Never had Carstairs seen Marjoram in such a mood; a cold aloofness which held everyone he had dealings with at arm's length had always characterised him before. Certainly this prospect of vast possessions had vitalised him.

Almost as if he had read the thought Marjoram stretched forth his arms exclaiming:

"It's such a mighty thing!"

Without regarding the interpolation Carstairs went on: "He certainly had malevolent intentions toward me; he had harboured a careless word I spoke years ago, as if it were an intentional insult. I expect his idea was to get even with me in the jungle, where

there could be no evidence as to what had happened. That he would only have done after he had seized my plan."

"I am sorry about your miserable little plan," said Marjoram, polite in manner if not in speech. "It is, however, quite safe, that is to say, it was lost somehow by that lunatic fiddler. How I loathe that man! It's exquisite that Min King should have made him dependent on me! Ensures some future interest in life for idle moments."

Again disregarding him Carstairs went on with his definite points. "How did Min King come by his death wound?"

"That I can tell you, he fell in with a party of Chins who were——" he paused for a simile, "all buzzing with their stings out. They fired into his party without asking questions—they hate Chinamen, and he had a goodish crowd with him. The body-guard scattered and fled, and the Chins dragged Min King along with them, probably with the intention of having a bit of fun with him, but one of their bullets, or slugs, had lodged near the spine, low down, and paralysed his legs. They thought he was dead, and threw him out on the rubbish heap. His men, however, had followed him up at a distance, and when they saw a chance came cautiously in to rescue him; they seem to have arrived just at the moment he was getting a bit of his own back with you," he grinned engagingly. "He told me all this. His followers had no doubt been watching that pantomime, and would have waited patiently enough for the curtain to fall, but you let out such a screech that the Chins rushed out, and

the Chinamen sprang in to rescue Min King, knowing it was probably their last chance."

"How did you get in touch with him after that?"

"He sent one of his men to find me at Alonzat, where he knew I intended to come; but I arrived there first and found a previous letter from him telling me he had gone into the jungle after you, and that he meant to break out on this side, so I was half-way here when I met his messenger, and knew exactly where to find him at once."

"Now we're up against the personal question," said Carstairs, looking straight at him. "What was the link between you and Min King?"

"There you're asking something more than I can tell you," replied Marjoram, throwing himself down on one side. "For some years past I 'felt it in my bones' that he liked me, as the girls say, but I never dared presume on it. Admiration possibly, sheer admiration," he concluded impudently, swinging back into his sitting posture, and resting his face on his crooked knees.

"Impossible! A Chinaman loathes foreigners."

"But Min King was not an ordinary Chink. He had been about the world too much, and that slander about his being an 'eleven-o'clock' Chinaman which nearly sent you into the next world need not necessarily have been untrue, still we won't repeat it."

"There was more in it than that, about you, I mean."

"At the end, yes." Marjoram gave a short laugh. "It had gained on the old chap so much that I think he got a bit touched on the subject; he thinks—

thought, I should say—that I am the reincarnation of his dead son, the only child he ever had."

"The Chinese don't believe in reincarnation, surely?"

"They have a lot of Buddhist notions mixed up with their Ancestor-worship all the same."

"Have you any Chinese blood in you?"

"Not that I know of."

"But then——?"

Marjoram went on: "When he discovered, there in the cave, that I was born on the same day of the same month and at the same hour of the day as his son was born a year before—the child had died within the year—then, of course, that clinched it."

"Were you?" Carstairs asked sarcastically.

He got no answer to that, Marjoram only continued looking at him with sparkling eyes and closed lips.

"It has paid you well. Was all that parade of devotion in the cave necessary?"

Marjoram displayed the first touch of heat he had shown during this strange interview. "Even you," he remarked sharply, "might have felt something resembling devotion for a man who had shown signs of granting you the power of a Monte Cristo."

"All that excessive anxiety then was not for the man, but for what he might leave you?"

"What do most of us love people for if not for what they give us? Disguise it as you will, that's at the root of all so-called love, even between man and woman."

Carstairs stood up in disgust. He was curious to learn more, but his gorge rose at this monstrous self-

revelation of a man without shame or decency. "I don't think there is anything else. I congratulate you," he said mockingly.

"You well may. Think of the power I hold now. But you can't. I myself have hardly a notion of it yet. Min King's interests are enormous. I could set the world ablaze in almost any quarter."

"A characteristic ideal! How was it then he didn't come to your rescue when he knew the firm was so much embarrassed?"

"I gather he wished us to smash up so that he might detach me from Fyfe whom he hated. Then he would have annexed me himself, but he hadn't mooted the matter to me."

"Or you would have gone over, of course, leaving Fyfe in the lurch! Even Min King didn't know your possibilities, it seems! I understand now why he wanted to get that invention from me on his own behalf, it was because he didn't want you to have it. By getting it himself he would have humiliated me first and destroyed me afterwards. What a power of purpose was concentrated in him, but his aims were clean compared with yours."

With that he walked away.

CHAPTER XIX

MARJORAM MEETS HIS MATCH

TOM MARJORAM was necessarily some time behind the others in returning to Rangoon. He wired to his partner from the first telegraph office, and got on to the railway as soon as possible to save time in the down journey. He finally arrived in Rangoon about eight o'clock one morning, and picking up a gharry told the man to drive straight to his own bungalow. Midway, changing his mind, he resolved to run in to the office just to tell Fyfe, who would already be there, his own splendid news, which he had so far carefully kept from everyone he had met, with whom he had talked.

Arriving in his office, high above the river, he found his table covered with an accumulated pile of correspondence which had its counterpart on the desk of his partner. Obviously Fyfe had not been in that morning. Marjoram rang the bell, and it was answered by one of the Eurasian clerks :

" If Mr. Fyfe is here would you tell him that I have returned ? " he said, speaking with his customary courtesy.

The man squirmed in his nervousness, Marjoram always afflicted him with unusual nervousness. He boggled at making a bald statement, but he had so

little time to clothe what he had to say in the sonorous words he felt were appropriate, that at last he gasped out in one rush:

"Mr. Fyfe is not coming here any more, sir, he has passed into immortality as a corpse."

Even Marjoram's nonchalance was broken up by that startling information, and he made an exclamation which struck Alonzo like a pistol shot.

"It is as I say, sir," he affirmed, trembling more than ever. "Two days ago Mr. Fyfe became an immortal corpse."

Accustomed though he was to the possibility of sudden death in the East, Marjoram flinched.

"What did he die of?" he asked at last.

"I believe that the disease which consummated the deceased gentleman's career was of the nature of dysentery," responded Alonzo, who had recovered a little.

"You may go."

Alone at his desk Marjoram pondered. Fyfe would certainly have been buried at once, for in this climate there was no delay possible. He might or might not have been alive when his partner's telegram arrived. Mrs. Fyfe must have been in an awkward position; she would probably be needing money with all the expenses of the funeral. Marjoram felt he would have to go to her at once. What a nuisance it all was, hampering him when he had so much else he wanted to do, such as seeing a lawyer, and getting Min King's will proved. Mechanically he opened one or two of the letters under his hand, and as he did so laughed aloud. An end had been put to the impudence of

the firm's creditors! Very soon these creatures, who politely "intimated," and "begged to draw his attention" to various unpleasant facts, would be cringing before him beseeching him to deal with them.

Suddenly his eye fell on a large violet-tinted and violet-scented envelope. He had no difficulty in guessing who that was from, even without the confirmation of the sprawling handwriting with its great loops to the capital M's.

Of course, it was from Mrs. Fyfe. But the contents were a second shock.

There was no formal beginning, only a single line of the large handwriting:

"Come to me directly you get back,

"VIOLET."

He looked out at the gay river scene and whistled softly. The nature of this appeal was in itself a warning. But undoubtedly he would have to go. Better get it done and over. The earlier the hour the less sentiment would there be. With that he went down, called another gharry, and was driven to his own bungalow to wash off the stains of travel.

It was only an hour later that he found himself in the Fyfes' drawing-room, which, with its rather stuffy furniture, was unlike most of the bungalows of Europeans in the East. Hardly had he had time to look round than the portière, which divided the next room from it, was raised, and Violet Fyfe stood there, posed. She was in a clinging filmy robe of the finest black chiffon, which showed up her fair hair and delicate colour. She held one arm up against the curtain so

that the chiffon fell away from it, leaving bare its white moulded curves. Then with a little cry, as if his presence were a glad surprise, she dropped the curtain and came forward with both hands outstretched.

Marjoram took them in his—he had to—and with great skill guided her to a chair by means of them, so that she was compelled to sit down, whereupon he sat down beside her.

"This is a most dreadful shock," he said in low, deep tones of sympathy.

She found a scrap of lace somewhere amid the folds of her garments, and pressed it gently below each blue eye after the manner of the stage. She knew it was safe to do so to-day, for she had decided that a "white" complexion suited the occasion.

"It is so sudden," she murmured.

"It is indeed. I only got back this morning. Did he receive my wire?"

"*I* did. They brought it from the office when he was lying here unconscious. It is all over now, and I am alone."

"Poor chap! Did he suffer much?"

"A great deal; yes, it was horrible." She quivered.

"Anything to account for it?"

"No, except that we had had a good deal of fruit, and he got a chill after eating it; the doctor said it was that. Poor Ted—he was so devoted to me." She stole a glance at Marjoram, but he was very carefully not looking at her.

"You must be wanting some money," he said tactfully. "Draw on me for anything; don't hesitate.

I have had some good luck, and shall be able to pull the business round, and then probably sell it, so you will come in for enough to make you comfortable in the end."

"But I shall always be alone."

"What, has no one been to see you and help you?"

"I didn't mean that; they are all most kind; indeed, they weary me, those good ladies, for they do not understand——"

As Marjoram did not ask what it was they did not understand, she went on:

"Of course, you being his partner, knew Ted well, you knew the difficulties of my life with him; however, it is all over now, and I have forgotten and forgiven everything."

"Takes a woman to play that sort of low-down game," thought Marjoram, feeling very virtuous. However, he knew that he must say something if he were not to leave the way open to greater dangers still, so he put in hastily:

"You won't be leaving for England for a little while, I suppose? Not until things are wound up?"

"*You* must decide that," she said very, very gently.

"When does the next Bibby boat go?" he asked quickly.

"She sails to-morrow." Then, as if that had reminded her of something, she added, forgetting her own personality for a moment, "I believe Mr. and Mrs. Carstairs are to go in her."

"Mr. and Mrs. Carstairs? Oh, they are married already, are they? They have lost no time. He

had left some things here in his rooms so that would make the formalities easy."

"They went over to Moulmein for a few days' honeymoon," said Mrs. Fyfe, whose loss had not made her less interested in small gossip. "But, if they are really sailing to-morrow, they must be back to-day."

"I wonder why she did it!" ejaculated Marjoram suddenly.

"Finding it impossible to carry out her intentions toward the boy, she has chosen this method of making herself safe," said Violet viciously.

"Safe? Oh, financially, you mean! But Carstairs has no money."

"She probably thought he had, and so she got hold of him; he would not, of course, have a chance when she followed him into the jungle."

He laughed a little at that, and thought it about time to finish the interview.

"Rely on me then for any money you want," he repeated, making a movement to go. "I will send you some round this evening to begin with."

Her carefully tended white hand shot out of its draperies and clutched his arm before he could get up. "Don't think I don't know how hard this is for you," she said, swaying toward him. "But we must wait! Whatever Ted made me suffer, I must treat his memory with respect. The world must never know how it has been between you and me."

Marjoram leaped at the one word that gave him a chance to get out of the embarrassing position. "Wait, yes, I'm sorry you will have to wait," said he disentangling himself. "But I'll get all the accounts

straightened out so soon as it is possible." This time he did manage to get on his feet, but Violet was on hers also. "The world is darkening, I am fainting; oh!" she cried, and with a little sigh collapsed.

He caught her as she slipped, laid her on a sofa, clapped his hands, and shouted for the ayah, who came running with a celerity that showed she had not been far off. Thus he made his escape.

"Jolly clever little woman that," he thought as he got safely off the premises. "Would she have tried it on if I had never kissed her, I wonder? She almost deserved to get me. But I have other games to play, and she would interfere with them. Jove, won't she be mad when she hears of Min King's fortune and what she's missed!" It suddenly occurred to him that perhaps after all she had heard a rumour of it, and that was the reason for her gambler's throw made with such indecent haste. These things had a way of leaking out mysteriously, even though it was very improbable that Carstairs or Diana had said anything.

Marjoram had driven himself in his own turn-out to the Fyfes' bungalow, and as he took the reins on leaving and ran into the long straight road into which the drive opened, he saw, coming toward him, an open carriage containing Diana alone, a Diana radiant with happiness. Tragedy did not suit her, was not the right setting for her at all; with this new, quiet happiness she had bloomed once more. As they met she looked full at him, and her joyous tranquil expression changed not the least; she made no sign that she saw him, she looked through him as if he were

transparent; his power over her was broken, and she showed it by giving him a direct cut.

Marjoram had drawn nearer and nearer to her with curiously mixed feelings in which resentment was uppermost. He could hardly have said why, but he felt distinctly resentful that she had so definitely allied herself with the enemy. He had determined to humiliate her by showing once more the power that he had exercised over her. Then came disillusion, piercing him most unexpectedly. She was free!

As he drove on he felt drawn to turn and glance back, and after resisting the desire for a moment, he yielded, just in time to see the carriage stop to pick up Carstairs and Ronald, who had walked on ahead.

Their happy voices came back to him along the spaces of the silent road.

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